

THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH IN POST- 2018 ETHIOPIA:

NAVIGATING CHURCH-STATE AND
INTER-RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS

Dereje Feyissa

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THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF). The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

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SUMMARY

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), one of the oldest Christian churches, was the state religion in Ethiopia until the 1974 revolution. Following the revolution and ethno-federal restructuring in the 1990s, the EOTC position weakened, while religious minorities gained more rights, challenging its dominance. The 2018 political shift brought a promising era for the EOTC, with political liberalization and expanded civic space that spurred religious activism. The relation between the EOTC and the administration of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali was initially positive. Abiy helped unify a long-standing rift in the church, restored confiscated properties and provided land for new churches. This alliance occurred in the broader context of political reform between 2018 and 2020, during which the Abiy administration received support from a pan-Ethiopianist camp, in opposition to ethnonationalist forces. There is also an ideological convergence between the two, particularly around a millenarian vision that both the Abiy administration and the EOTC share—a vision that draws upon the great tradition in Ethiopia, to which the EOTC has made significant contributions.

This was, however, a short-lived alliance. A major factor in the deterioration of the relationship between the EOTC and the Abiy administration is the deepening security crisis that disproportionately affected new regional minorities, in particular the Amharas living outside the Amhara region and Orthodox Christians, where they are a religious minority. This ethnically and religiously targeted violence is closely linked to the security vacuum left in the wake of the transfer of power from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its administration. The security situation was further compounded by the rise of ethnonational insurgencies, particularly in Oromia, where violence was strategically deployed to disrupt political alliances, such as the one between the Abiy administration and the pan-Ethiopianist camp. This violence must be understood in the context of Ethiopian history, whereby Amharas and Orthodox Christians are linked to the imperial domination of nations and nationalities in the broader south. The ethno-federal system has created new regional minorities with unequal rights, fuelling tensions. The excessive optimism of the Abiy administration and its reliance on positive thinking has led to a lenient approach to security, viewing instability as a mere growing pain to be tolerated on the path toward prosperity.

Tensions between the EOTC and the Abiy administration are further fuelled by the perception that religious minorities are favoured. Muslims and Protestants have gained religious rights and visibility, challenging the historic EOTC monopoly, especially around sacred narratives. Muslims emphasize early Islamic ties in Ethiopia, while Protestants seek to reframe Ethiopia as the land of reformation. The EOTC resents government recognition of religious diversity and increased public access for minorities. The political visibility of religious minorities, in particular Protestants who occupy top political offices under the Abiy administration, further

complicates the situation. The blending of religion and politics reinforces EOTC views of religious favouritism. Despite Abiy's cautious approach, some governing ideologies such as having a calling and positive thinking reflect Protestant influences and values, while subtly suggesting Orthodox Christianity and Islam are less transformational.

Government interference in the EOTC schism, particularly in Oromia in early 2023, worsened tensions. The government recognized the demands of a splinter group, which the central synod deemed illegal, and provided security to them. Excessive force was used against those resisting splinter group actions to seize churches. The EOTC views this as a political move by renegade bishops, supported by the government, to undermine the central synod and threaten church unity. Government interference in EOTC affairs may not be aimed at destroying the church, as some Orthodox activists claim. Instead, this could reflect a strategy of leveraging power over influential institutions. The Abiy administration has used both conciliation and confrontation to control the EOTC; for example, as a tool for mobilization during the Tigray war and aligning the church with government interests to prevent other political groups from mobilizing its large constituency.

Internal EOTC schisms are not solely due to government interference but also stem from historical factors such as the rivalry between Amhara and Tigray clergy for Orthodox supremacy and their divided perspectives on the war in Tigray. Similarly, calls for ethnic diversity in leadership and language have fuelled the Oromia schism. The separate churches also reflect ethnic divisions: The Tigray church, named after the first bishop based in Axum, is called Menbere Selama, while the Oromo church is known as the Oromia and Nations and Nationalities Synod. Its second iteration is Menbere Petros, named after Abune Petros, an Oromo bishop known for his resistance against fascist Italy.

In the context of its unravelling historically established hegemony, the EOTC has resisted government interference, while negotiating its declining position relative to other religious communities. This resistance has included large-scale mobilizations against government actions, drawing on the rich symbolism and cultural infrastructure of the church. Leveraging political liberalization and the expansion of civic space, EOTC activists have engaged in discursive practices aimed at reimagining Ethiopia through the lens of Orthodox Christianity. The EOTC has also leveraged its status as the largest religious demographic and mobilized at the intersection of religious and ethnic identities to tap into communities of grievances. Political parties and armed movements with strong Orthodox Christian affiliations have also emerged in this environment. It remains to be seen if these mobilizations will achieve their desired outcomes or if they will deepen internal divisions in the church.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the complex and shifting situation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in post-2018 Ethiopia, highlighting its struggle to maintain influence amid political, social and religious changes.¹ In addition to examining both the current EOTC relationship with the government and interfaith dynamics, this analysis takes a historical perspective to contextualize these developments. Understanding the ongoing relationship between the major Ethiopian religious communities—Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Protestants—and the government requires an exploration of the historical hegemony of the EOTC and how this has contributed to the marginalization of Muslims and Protestants as religious minorities. This historical lens also sheds light on the decline of EOTC dominance, particularly since the 1974 revolution, which restructured the Ethiopian state and empowered these historically marginalized groups, fuelling new grievances in the EOTC.

The historical construction of EOTC hegemony is deeply intertwined with the political relationship between church and state throughout Ethiopian history. The EOTC has long defined its identity through sacred narratives, most notably the biblical connection to Ethiopia through the fourteenth century document known as the *'Kebre Negest'* (Glory of Kings). Often referred to as the national epic of Ethiopia, this narrative provides a foundational myth for the Ethiopian monarchy through the biblical story of the Queen of Sheba of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel and the child they begot, Menelik I.² The myth of the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Axum, considered a holy city in Orthodox tradition, also constructs Ethiopia as the chosen nation, supplanting Israel. This is evidenced in the claim of the Tsion Mariam Church (Church of St Mary of Zion) in Axum to host the Ark.

This divine history accords the EOTC primacy over all other religions, while simultaneously consecrating the Ethiopian nation. This myth was institutionalized in 1270 with the establishment, also called the 'restoration', of the Solomonic dynasty, which continued until the 1974 revolution, representing one of the oldest and longest reigning monarchies in world history. The Solomonic monarchs primarily hailed from what is now the Amhara region, with

1 The EOTC is part of the broader family of Oriental Orthodox churches, which also includes the Egyptian Coptic, Armenian and Indian churches. These churches share a common theological perspective on Christology, emphasizing the unity of Christ's divine and human natures. This view contrasts with the dual nature of Christ as defined in the Chalcedonian Creed, which is accepted by Catholic and Protestant traditions.

2 AE Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only Son Menyelek. The Kebra Nagast*, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001.



the notable exception of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889), who was from Tigray. While many emperors had mixed ethnic backgrounds, especially from the seventeenth century onward, their failure to publicly embrace this diversity—coupled with the use of Amharic as the state language and Orthodox Christianity as the state religion—tended to associate imperial rule with the Amhara identity.

The status of the EOTC as a state religion, as enshrined in the 1954 constitution, reflects its deep entwinement with the Ethiopian state. Historically, the Ethiopian state, originating in the northern highlands where Orthodox Christians are the majority, maintained a strong ideological and political connection with the EOTC. The Amharic saying *'ye siso mengist'* (one-third of a state) aptly captures EOTC self-understanding as a defining feature of national life, along with corresponding political and economic privileges. Above all, this privileged status was expressed in the extensive land the EOTC owned, which it used to build churches and generate income. This church–state relationship persisted even as the Ethiopian state expanded territorially into regions where Muslims and Protestants were dominant, particularly in the south, east and west—areas where alternative religions were sometimes embraced as forms of resistance.³

The 1974 revolution marked a separation between church and state, ushering in an era of religious equality and paving the way for a secular order. The political changes of 1991 further entrenched this secular order, with the creation of regional political spaces under Ethiopian ethno-federalism that reflected the diverse ethnic and religious demographic across the country. In the new federal system, inaugurated in 1995, the EOTC only remains a majority religion in the northern states of Amhara and Tigray, while the east is predominantly Muslim, the west is largely Protestant and the south is a mix of religious affiliations. In this restructured political landscape, new ethnic and religious identities have emerged that fuel tensions between natives and outsiders. This development has significant implications for the security and economic well-being of religious minorities in these regions.

The erosion of EOTC power has been accompanied by the rise and increasing influence of religious minorities. To grasp the current dynamics, it is crucial to explore how the once dominant EOTC role, shaped by close church–state relations, has declined in the context of Ethiopian state reform. This process has empowered previously marginalized religious communities, leading to internal EOTC tensions. One core challenge facing the EOTC is its perception of equality as a form of reverse domination; that is, the fear that the empowerment of other groups may come at its own expense. While the rebalancing of power relations may sometimes appear as reverse domination, it is unavoidable that such processes come with inherent costs to more powerful actors. The violence against the EOTC is often intertwined with ethnic and religious identities, and also has historical roots; notably, while there is a sizable Muslim population among the Amhara, the majority adhere to the Orthodox faith. Violence against the Amhara by ethnic minorities—who often associate the Amhara with the oppressive

3 For example, see: Mohammed Hassen, 'Islam as an Ideology of Resistance among the Oromo of Ethiopia', *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26/3 (2009).

Ethiopian state—is frequently projected onto Orthodox Christians.

Political and religious liberalization since 2018 provides hope for improved interfaith relations. At the same time, however, this requires mediation of the concerns of various religious communities. The Ethiopian government now faces the challenge of balancing the interests of the new religious minorities and responding to demands for diversity in religious communities without alienating the EOTC establishment. The EOTC also currently faces a dual challenge: Safeguarding its autonomy and regaining its influence with the government, while navigating competition with other religious groups in an increasingly pluralistic society.

THE EOTC AND THE PROSPERITY PARTY

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which governed the country from 1991 to 2019, was succeeded by the Prosperity Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from 2020.⁴ This shift came about through a combination of popular protests and internal power struggles within the EPRDF. As with its predecessor, the Derg (1974–1991), the EPRDF governed the religious sector through a secular constitutional framework. Both regimes, however, interfered in religious affairs and sought to control religious institutions in what appears to be a divide and rule strategy. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was particularly affected by state-led reforms, as successive governments aimed to address historically entrenched religious inequalities.

Since 2018, relations between the EOTC and the new administration have shifted from mutually supportive and beneficial to tense and confrontational. Abiy initially played the role of peacebuilder and unifier. He not only helped reconcile internal EOTC divisions but promoted broader ideals of religious pluralism. Over time, however, Abiy's increasingly faith-based approach to governance appears to have given his political style a marked Protestant character, despite Ethiopia being a constitutionally mandated secular state. Ultimately, this has served to significantly erode relations between the EOTC and the Prosperity Party, and deepen divisions between faith-based communities more generally.

THE BEGINNING: 2018–2020

The initial relationship between the EOTC and the government led by Abiy was promising. Seeking to distance himself from the previous EPRDF administration, Abiy moved to liberalize the political and civic space as part of the reform process. This created a more open environment for religious expression and civic activism, with the public expression of religious identity embraced by wide range of religious communities in Ethiopia.⁵ With the country emerging from protracted violence and political instability, Abiy was initially welcomed by all

4 Abiy came to power in 2018 as chairman of the EPRDF, and thus prime minister, but by the end of 2019 had overseen the merger of the EPRDF's constituent and allied regionally-based political parties into the single Prosperity Party—with the exception of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), which rejected the merger and fell into opposition for the first time since 1991.

5 Abiy himself personally identifies as a Protestant evangelical and is married to a prominent gospel singer.

faith groups. Many even viewed him through a messianic lens—a leader who resonated deeply with the religious character of Ethiopia. Abiy also nurtured this image in public speeches, which frequently make religious references. This earned him the title ‘*hizbun ye mimesil meri*’ (a leader who looks like the people he leads). This reflects the self-understanding of Ethiopians as deeply religious, with faith playing a central role in national identity; for example, among Orthodox Ethiopians, nearly all (98 per cent) say religion is very important to them.⁶

Abiy’s peacebuilding efforts, particularly in addressing divisions between Ethiopian religious institutions, significantly enhanced his early political credibility. Raised by an Orthodox Christian mother and a Muslim father, Abiy positioned himself as a mediator between diverse religious communities, embodying the ideal of religious pluralism and coexistence. This capacity to bridge divides became a cornerstone of his political identity, shaping the image of Ethiopia as a harmonious multi-faith nation. As Abiy’s political tenure progressed, however, this vision of unity and pluralism evolved under the influence of the shifting dynamics of power politics and new political imperatives.

During his first two years in office, Abiy worked actively to reconcile internal EOTC factions, as well as divisions between Muslim and Protestant communities. This enhanced his reputation as a unifying figure in the religious and political landscape of Ethiopia. While reconciliation processes had started before his tenure, Abiy played a crucial role in the historic reunification of two rival EOTC synods. This is a primary point of convergence between the EOTC and Abiy. Lasting for 27 years, this schism reflects the broader ethnicization of public life under EPRDF ethnic federalism. In 1991, Patriarch Abune Merkorios, an Amhara, was forced to resign.⁷ In 1997, he relocated to Washington DC, where he established a separate EOTC synod, which was excommunicated. Merkorios was replaced by Patriarch Abune Paulos, a Tigrayan, in a succession that violated the EOTC canon, which forbids the installation of a new patriarch while the incumbent is still alive.

In 2018, after extensive mediation, the reunification of the EOTC was formally celebrated in Washington DC, with Abiy in attendance. Invoking scripture—‘Now is the day of salvation’—Abiy subsequently persuaded Merkorios to join him on his return flight to Addis Ababa.⁸ The synod officially returned to Addis Ababa in August 2018, marking a significant milestone in

6 Jeff Diamont, ‘Ethiopia is an outlier in the Orthodox Christian world’, Pew Research Center, 28 November 2017. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/11/28/ethiopia-is-an-outlier-in-the-orthodox-christian-world/>.

7 The word ‘Abune’ (literally, ‘our father’) is an honorific title used for any bishop of the EOTC or the Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church (TOTC).

8 ‘አቡነ ሉቃስ: - Abune Lukas Speech on Abiy Ahmed’, *Great Abyssinia*, 3 January 2024. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=abune+lukas+speech&&mid>.

both religious and political realms.⁹ This is reflected in a statement Abiy makes during the reconciliation meeting between the two synods: ‘We want the unity of the EOTC because the church is the nation [Amharic: *hager nat*].’¹⁰ The reaction of the church authorities was jubilant, with Patriarch Merkorios proclaiming: ‘Thanks be to God! At last the church has got her [*sic*] own son back in *Arat Kilo* [a colloquial reference to the palace, and state power more broadly].’¹¹

The EOTC granted PM Abiy and First Lady Zenash Tayachew a special peace and reconciliation award for their pivotal role in reunifying the church, which further solidified Abiy’s legitimacy among Orthodox Ethiopians and enhanced his broader political standing. At the award ceremony in Addis Ababa on 10 September 2018, Abiy highlighted the significant role the EOTC has played in the development and formation of the Ethiopian nation. By working to widely popularize the phrase ‘Orthodox *hager nat*’, Abiy emphasizes the central role of the EOTC in nation-building. Arguably, however, this is as much a recognition of EOTC primacy as it is a political calculation aligned with the various political alliances in the early years of political reform. Abiy’s approach reflects a unique blend of spiritual and political authority: Both acknowledging the foundational role of the EOTC and navigating religious pluralism, while also publicly endorsing his solidarity with Protestant religious leaders.¹²

Another significant point of convergence between the EOTC and Abiy is rooted in the millenarian tradition of the church. Millenarianism envisions profound societal transformation, often in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event, leading to a utopian age.¹³ Millenarianism is deeply embedded in the political and religious culture of Ethiopia. This is evident in historical belief in the coming of a messianic figure, such as Emperor Tewodros II, who symbolizes a transformative shift.¹⁴ In particular, EOTC millenarian traditions and Abiy’s self-perception

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- 9 The agreement to reunify the church also created a unique division of responsibilities: Patriarch Abune Merkorios assumed the role of spiritual leader and Patriarch Abune Mathias took on administrative duties.
- 10 Million Zena, ‘Reconciliation Conference of the Orthodox Church chaired by PM Abiy Ahmed’, *YouTube*, 27 July 2018. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb8kzDi_3vM.
- 11 Habtom Yohannes, ‘Ethnicity Tears the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church Apart’, *Public Orthodoxy*, 10 February 2023. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/02/10/ethnicity-tears-the-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahdo-church-apart/>.
- 12 Dereje Feyissa, ‘The return of religion to Ethiopian politics and its peace and security implications’, paper presented at the conference on Ethiopia in post-EPRDF: rupture and continuity, University of California & Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa, 23–24 August 2024.
- 13 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, London: Pimlico, 1993.
- 14 As Ethiopia faced political crises and lawlessness, emperors such as Tewodros increasingly embraced their messianic roles, positioning themselves as saviours of the nation. Ethiopian messianic millenarianism also has literary roots in foundational texts such as the *Kibere Negast* and the *Fikare Iyasus*. See: Merid Wolde Aregay, ‘Millenarian Traditions in Ethiopia, 1500–1855’, in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 26–29 April 1982, ed. Sven Rubenson, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1984.

align in their shared messianic themes, which are anchored in the covenantal notion of Ethiopia as God's chosen nation. Abiy seeks to merge this ancient tradition with a modern vision of Ethiopia as the chosen nation led by the chosen man. His reverence for figures such as Emperor Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie, a large wax statue of whom he placed at Unity Park, fits into this messianic narrative.

Although his public identity is Protestant, Abiy's sense of messianic power is informed by a prophecy his Orthodox mother cites that frames him as divinely chosen to rule as the seventh king of Ethiopia.¹⁵ Here, EOTC millenarianism and the Protestant notion of 'calling' converge in the belief that the best way for anyone to serve God is to simply do whatever work God has placed before them to the utmost of their ability.¹⁶ Based on a self-understanding of being called to power at the age of seven, Abiy's conception of politics is informed by both a messianic vision and a grand transformational scheme. His leadership refers to and is inspired by the ancient history of Ethiopia and its restored greatness. Abiy's inner circle, including key figures such as his advisor Daniel Kibiret, a former EOTC deacon and well known Orthodox scholar, also reflects a strong Orthodox influence.

In addition to ideological resonances, the initial alliance between the EOTC and the Abiy administration is shaped by their shared opposition to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). A broader alignment against ethnonationalist forces in general, and those represented by the TPLF and Oromo nationalists in particular, further shapes this bond. The EOTC has long found the ethno-federal political system established by the TPLF-led EPRDF problematic because it is perceived as a threat to a concept of national unity in which the EOTC played a key role.¹⁷ Against this, TPLF and Oromo nationalists were the main opposition to the Abiy administration, an alliance that was cemented during the Tigray war (2020–2022). EOTC leadership (with the exception of Abune Mathias, a Tigrayan) supported government war efforts but at a significant cost. This deepened internal divisions and ultimately led to a new schism that resulted in the formation of a new independent Tigrayan synod in October 2024.

The historical revisionism that accompanies the strong church–state relations shaping the initial phase of the Abiy government has also sparked a backlash from other ethnonationalist groups. In particular, Oromo nationalists reject the Abiy administration portrayal of Menelik II as a national hero. Their publicized pilgrimage to the Anole Memorial in Oromia, which condemns Menelik as internal colonialist, highlights the deepening ethnic and political divisions

15 'Mom Told Me I'll be Ethiopia's 7th King: Pastor Abiy Ahmed', *TesfaNews Media*, 17 May 2018. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhDoLdIYfg>.

16 This integration of Abiy's religious conception of power and politics as informed by the Protestant notion of 'calling' and the Orthodox millenarian tradition appears to have been facilitated by the localization of Protestantism in Ethiopia, which initially faced resistance from the Orthodox Church as a foreign religion associated with Western missionaries. For more on the concept of 'calling', see: Md Fozle Rabbi, 'The Concept of Luther's Calling with Legacy and Contemporary Relevance', 1 July 2024. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5044836.

17 Interview with a member of the Mahibere Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 19 September 2024.

in Ethiopia.¹⁸ It is in such locations that Abiy's grand narrative, aligned with imperial glory, faces significant resistance.

RELATIONS DETERIORATE: 2020–2024

The initially cordial relationship between the EOTC and the Abiy administration quickly deteriorated, giving way to tension and then confrontation. This shift occurred within a rapidly changing political landscape and a volatile system of alliances. The demise of EOTC relations with the Prosperity Party government revolves around four key issues: 1) a sense of growing insecurity (feeling under attack) among Orthodox Christians; 2) EOTC perceptions of government favouritism for religious minorities; 3) concern about a faith-based bias in government; and 4) government interference in EOTC religious affairs.

Feeling under attack

One contentious issue between the EOTC and the Abiy administration is related to the church feeling under attack as a result of the security crisis in Ethiopia. A series of violent incidents, particularly in Oromia, prompted Orthodox church members to respond. In September 2019, millions of EOTC followers in the Amhara region protested what they perceived as a planned attack on the church, accusing the government of failing to take action.¹⁹ A month later, on 23 October 2019, unrest erupted in Addis Ababa after the Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed accused government authorities of threatening his security.²⁰ The protests spread across Oromia, Harari and Dire Dawa, escalating into communal violence.²¹ In February 2020, police shot and killed two Orthodox men in Addis Ababa in a dispute over a church construction, triggering further violence.²² After Hachalu Hundessa, a popular Oromo singer considered as the face of the Oromo protest against the EPRDF (2014–2018), was shot and killed on 29 June 2020, more than 120 people were subsequently killed in protests.²³

18 Tom Gardner, *The Abiy project. God, power and war in the new Ethiopia*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2024.

19 'Ethiopian Church followers took to the street across many cities, towns', *Borkena*, 15 September 2019. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://borkena.com/2019/09/15/ethiopian-church-followers-took-to-the-street-across-many-cities-towns/#google_vignette.

20 'Protests Spread After Standoff at Ethiopian Activist's Home', VOA, 23 October 2019. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_protests-spread-after-standoff-ethiopian-activists-home/6178090.html.

21 Menetasnot Desta and Deacon Solomon Kibriye, 'Orthodox Youth Clash with Police in Addis Ababa Over Land Encroachment – Two Killed', *Orthodoxy Cognate Page*, 5 February 2020. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://ocpsociety.org/news/orthodox-youth-clash-with-police-in-addis-ababa-over-land-encroachment-two-killed/>.

22 'Two people killed after midnight police shooting in Addis Abeba', *Addis Standard*, 5 February 2020. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-two-people-killed-after-midnight-police-shooting-in-addis-abeba/>.

23 'Hachalu Hundessa: Ethiopia singer's death unrest killed 166', *BBC*, 5 July 2020. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53298845>.

While there appears to have been a targeted attack on Orthodox Christians and non-Oromo minorities, particularly in East Arsi, no official breakdown of the victims by religion has been provided.²⁴ The identity of Haccalu's killer and the motive behind his death remain subjects of speculation, with various groups exchanging blame. Regardless of who was responsible, the Oromo public largely perceived Haccalu's death as an attack on the embodiment of Oromo protest. Oromo activists and nationalist media pointed fingers at the Abiy administration, especially as it was aligned with Pan-Ethiopianists, with the Amhara community at its core.²⁵ This alliance led to the channelling of Oromo anger toward minorities in Oromia, particularly the Amhara and Orthodox Christians. An investigation undertaken by the church placed blame on ethnic and religious radicals both inside and outside the government for orchestrating the violence.²⁶

In January 2022, yet another wave of violence erupted during the Epiphany procession in Woybela Mariam-Burayyu (a town in Oromia near Addis Ababa), resulting in deaths and injuries stemming from a controversy over flags. During the procession, Orthodox youth carried the old national flag—the tricolour without the federal emblem that represents diversity. Oromo nationalists and the Oromia regional government view this flag as a symbol of imperial repression against the Oromo people, while the EOTC regards it as sacred, representing Ethiopia as a covenant nation. These conflicting interpretations of the symbolism of these flags fuelled tensions, quickly escalating into a confrontation between the Orthodox youth and the Oromia regional security forces. The regional security forces fired guns, claiming that the Orthodox youth had attempted to seize weapons from them.²⁷

The lack of adequate government response to these ethnically and religiously targeted killings marks a significant turning point in the relationship between the EOTC and the Abiy administration. As with all other sections of society, the EOTC has been profoundly affected by the security crisis that has emerged under the Abiy administration—even developing a siege mentality. The lack of a strong government response to ethnic and religious violence reflects a complex mix of institutional weaknesses, political strategy and an ideological commitment to transformative change that can sometimes be prioritized over immediate action, further complicating the church–state relationship. Failures to keep vulnerable communities safe and

24 'Ethiopia: Understanding Oromia's mayhem after Hachalu's murder', *The Africa Report with Ethiopia Insight*, 11 January 2021. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.theafricareport.com/57957/ethiopia-understanding-omorias-mayhem-after-hachalus-murder/>.

25 Shimelis Mulugeta Kene and Solen Feyissa, 'Pan-Ethiopianists vs Ethno-Nationalists: The Narrative Elite War in Ethiopia', *The Elephant*, 27 November 2020. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2020/11/27/pan-ethiopianists-vs-ethno-nationalists-the-narrative-elite-war-in-ethiopia/>.

26 Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'Violence & Human Rights Violations following Musician Hachalu Hundessa's Assassination', Investigation Report, Addis Ababa: January 2021.

27 'Oromia Police shot dead two, injure several others at Timket festival over flag controversy', *The Habesha*, 22 January 2022. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://zehabesha.com/oromia-police-shot-dead-two-injure-several-others-at-timket-festival-over-flag-controversy/>.

secure has eroded trust and deepened tensions between Orthodox Christians and the Prosperity Party government.

Favouring religious minorities

Since the 1974 revolution, the EOTC has resisted the restructuring of the Ethiopian state, fearing a loss of its hegemonic status relative to other religious communities and the privileges that came with it. As the EOTC had anticipated, the Derg government declared religious equality, resulting in EOTC loss of status as the state religion—a position it had held for centuries. The 1991 political changes further deepened the principle of religious equality, prompting religious minorities to become more assertive in demanding their rights, including fair allocation of land from the state.²⁸

Empowered by government policies in support of religious diversity, the growing demands for recognition from Protestant and Muslim communities have proved problematic for the EOTC. This has also deepened divisions between the church and the current Prosperity Party government. In 2021, for example, Muslim activists sought to hold the Grand Street *Iftar* (fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan) in Meskel Square, a space long considered sacred by Orthodox Christians. Whereas the EOTC opposed this, Muslim activists rhetorically rebranded the square as ‘Eid Square’.²⁹ This highlights broader tensions around the visibility of Islam in public life, especially since 2018. As part of its efforts to promote religious pluralism, for example, the government has hosted an annual *iftar* at the Grand Palace. In 2022, it also launched the Eid-to-Eid Great Ethiopian Homecoming initiative to strengthen ties with the Muslim world. Framed in the context of the #NoMore movement against Western criticism,³⁰ this programme aims to position Ethiopia as a model of religious coexistence. These efforts have sparked resentment among some Orthodox Christian groups, however, which view the increased public visibility of Islam in particular as a challenge to their cultural and religious dominance, deepening tensions over competing claims to public space and national identity.³¹

This contention is part of broader efforts by the Abiy administration to address historically entrenched religious inequalities. Beyond symbolic concessions and increased access to public

28 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Muslims Struggling for Recognition in Ethiopia’, in *Muslim Ethiopia*, eds. Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

29 ‘Addis Ababa city administration reconsiders position on Iftar on Meskel Square’, *Borkena*, 10 May 2021. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2021/05/10/iftar-addis-ababa-city-administration-reconsiders-position-meskel-square/>. See also, Dalaya Ashenafi Esayiias, ‘Politicizing Public Events in Addis Ababa’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/politicizing-public-events-in-addis-ababa/>.

30 #NoMore was a social media campaign launched by Ethiopian diaspora members in North America and Europe to counter Western criticism in the internal affairs of Ethiopia during the war in Tigray war (2020–2022).

31 Jörg Hausteiner, ‘Religious polarization in Ethiopia. Urban conflicts and resources for peace’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Religion-Synthesis_Final.pdf.

spaces, these efforts also include legal reforms such as the re-establishment of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (the central governing body of Islam representing Ethiopian Muslims),³² greater political representation for Muslims within the Prosperity Party and the establishment of Islamic banks—issues for which the Muslim community has long advocated. The Abiy administration has also actively involved Muslim community leaders in its diplomatic efforts, given the increasingly influential Gulf States.³³

In February 2022, a controversy erupted during a fundraising event for war-affected communities, organized by Apostle Zelalem Getachew, founder of the Mission for Nations Church and head of the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers Churches (ECGBC). The event was held at Meskel Square, which offended many Orthodox Christians, who not only felt excluded from the decision-making process but thought it could have been held somewhere else (more representative of those who had been impacted by the war). During the event, Apostle Zelalem Getachew controversially declared, ‘*Mesqel Adebabayin eniwerisalen*’ (We will inherit Meskel Square). While the exact meaning of his statement remains unclear, it is widely interpreted by Orthodox Christians as an exclusive assertion of ownership over a space they consider sacred and integral to their identity. The situation was exacerbated by remarks from the mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebei, to the mainly Protestant audience, who states that ‘Meskel Square belongs to all Addis Ababans’ and that it had been renovated with taxpayer money.³⁴ For many Orthodox Christians, the comments from the mayor are seen as a direct challenge to their historical claim of ownership over the square, especially because of her evangelical Christian background.³⁵ Apostle Zelalem later clarified his statement, rebuking his critics for politically motivated misinterpretation of his words, and for taking his message out of context: In reality, he intended to say, ‘Let us go out into the open and proclaim our faith’, emphasizing that God is not of this world and would not grant a title deed.³⁶ In turn, this experience feeds into eroding relations between the EOTC and the federal government, with other events having a similar

32 Decree No 1207/2020 by the Ethiopian House of Representatives declares the legal personality of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council.

33 See Jason Mosley, Nada Wann, Yinebeb Nigatu, Mahad Wasuge, Adel Hamaizia, Georgia Cole and Federico Donelli, ‘Turkey and the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: Fluctuating dynamics of engagement, investment and influence’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/turkey-and-gulf-states-horn-africa/>.

34 Honest Pictures, ‘ይህ አደባባይ የህዝብ አደባባይ ነው የአ/አ ከጎቲባ አዳነች አሲቤ ከመስቀል አደባባይ የፀሎትና ምልኛ ፕሮግራም ላይ የተላለፈ ቀጥተኛ መልዕክት’ (‘This Square is a public square – a speech made by Adanech Abebei at Mesqel Square on the occasion of a prayer program for the displaced’), *YouTube*, 9 January 2022. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjIoMtD9F34>.

35 Focus group discussion with Orthodox Christians, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2024.

36 አንወርሳለን @apostle_zelalem, TikTok post, 14 April 2022. Accessed 20 March 2025, https://www.tiktok.com/@apostle_zelalem/video/7086501667763539205.

effect.³⁷

Government bias: *ye Pente mengist*

The Abiy administration is increasingly perceived by Orthodox Christians in terms of the phrase ‘*ye Pente mengist*’ (a government of Protestants). Revealing a significant degree of alienation, some Orthodox groups now fear a Protestant domination, spurred on by the increasing public visibility of Protestantism and Abiy’s own faith.³⁸ An Orthodox Amhara-leaning website even suggests that external powers are pushing the Prosperity Gospel³⁹ to replace the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the state religion.⁴⁰ These fears are compounded by the public support of some Protestant leaders, who are known for their Prosperity Gospel teachings, for Abiy.⁴¹ The tendency to define Protestantism as transformational exacerbates an already fraught situation,

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- 37 In 2020, for example, tensions rose when the city renovated the square without consulting the EOTC, prompting a government apology. See: ‘Ethiopian church demands apology from Addis Ababa City Administration’, *Borkena*, 1 May 2020. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2020/05/01/ethiopian-church-demands-apology-from-addis-ababa-city-administration/>. Similarly, when the city moved the fruit and vegetable market to Janmeda, a church property, during COVID-19 restrictions, Orthodox leaders protested, viewing it as an encroachment. In response, the EOTC synod sent a formal letter to the mayor on 1 May 2020, which led to a standoff. After security concerns prevented an initial meeting, the mayor ultimately agreed to meet at the EOTC patriarchate on 19 May 2020, resulting in a resolution of the dispute. See: Maya Misikir, ‘Public in Dark as Mesqel Square Rehab Commences’, *Addis Fortune*, 9 May 2020. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://addisfortune.news/public-in-dark-as-mesqel-square-rehab-commences/>.
- 38 Robert Jackson, ‘Prosperity theology and the faith movement’, *themelios* 15/1 (no date). Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org//themelios/article/prosperity-theology-and-the-faith-movement>.
- 39 Also known as the Word of Faith movement, the Prosperity Gospel is a segment of Pentecostal Protestantism. It teaches that believers are entitled to prosperity in all aspects of life—finances, health, relationships and more. It emphasizes positive thinking and encourages political engagement, believing that strong faith can foster societal good. Originating in the United States, it is now a global movement, particularly influential in Africa. The Prosperity Party name and the party emblems established by Abiy, along with party focus on positive thinking, suggest that his governance could be informed by Prosperity Gospel teachings; e.g. one study links Abiy’s leadership to the ethos of Prosperity Gospel, noting that Prosperity Party leaders aim to convince Ethiopians that despite daily struggles, a better future awaits. See: Mulubrhan Balehegn, ‘The politics and problems of Prosperity Party Gospel’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 4 April 2021. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/04/the-politics-and-problems-of-prosperity-party-gospel/>.
- 40 ‘Systemic pressure on Ethiopian Orthodox Church mounting’, *Borkena*, 3 February 2022. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/02/03/ethiopian-orthodox-church-under-attack-from-government-authorities/>.
- 41 Some of these include Pastor Yonatan Aklilu of Addis Kidan Kahinat, Pastor Tamirat of Christ Jesus Life International Church and Dr Beta Mengistu of Beza International Church.

with the EOTC perceiving this as evidence of an anti-Orthodox and anti-Muslim agenda.⁴²

A 31 October 2024 parliamentary address by Abiy reinforces EOTC feelings of government biases. Highlighting the early introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia as a great opportunity, Abiy goes on to say:

...this [Orthodox] Christianity has not yet served as the transformative tool needed to turn poverty into prosperity. Similarly, Islam was introduced to Ethiopia early on, even before it reached other parts of the world. ... Yet, even this early embrace of Islam has not been harnessed as a tool to lift us from poverty.⁴³

Abiy also notes that while both faiths could have been powerful forces for change, they have not yet fulfilled their potential in reshaping the social and economic realities of Ethiopia. Orthodox critics of the current administration perceive this argument not in terms of regret about the lack of transformation in Ethiopia but rather as a statement against the EOTC. In response, they point to a flawed assumption about the material transformation of a country: ‘nowhere in the world did priests and sheikhs serve as modernists but legitimate leaders with vision did’.⁴⁴

Abiy’s speeches at Protestant gatherings, where he openly identifies as Protestant, have served to underscore Orthodox fears. A particularly controversial moment came on 6 September 2020 when Abiy addressed a youth event organized by Pastor Yonatan Aklilu of Addis Kidan Kahinat Church, calling the pastor a ‘model citizen’ and promising to award him EUR 25,000, which he (Abiy) received when he won the Hessian Peace Prize from Germany in 2019.⁴⁵ For many Orthodox activists, this supports their belief that the current administration favours

42 In summer 2019, for example, a controversial document circulated inside the Prosperity Party entitled ‘*Ye Poletica Bilitsigiman Yemaregaget Tilmina Fetenawochu*’ (‘Ensuring Political Prosperity and Its Challenges’). Heavily influenced by Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the internal Prosperity Party document valorizes Protestant values and work ethics, while criticizing Orthodox and Islamic traditions as both unsuitable for development (so long as they romanticize poverty and condemn prosperity, with the focus on life after death instead of on a better life in the here and now) and posing a challenge for democratization. See: ‘ፀቢይና ደም መላሽ በቤተክርስቲያን ፤ የኦርቶዶክስና እስልምና “ሐጢአት”’ (‘Abiy and Demelash in Church—The Sins of Orthodox Christians and Muslims’), *Ethio Forum*, 6 November 2024. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch=dFLK5uR9HL8>. Also see: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Routledge, 2001.

43 ‘ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር በቤይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) ከምክር ቤት አባላት ለተነሱ ጥያቄዎች የሰጡት ምላሽ - ክፍል 2’ (‘The Answers PM Abi Ahmed gave to the MPs, Part 2’), Fana Television, 31 October 2024. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4BfruRSWwg>.

44 ‘ፀቢይና ደም መላሽ በቤተክርስቲያን ፤ የኦርቶዶክስና እስልምና “ሐጢአት”’, *Ethio Forum*.

45 Pastor Yonatan Aklilu is a Pentecostal pastor known for his *Melkam Wetat* (Excellent Youth) project. See: ‘ጠ/ሚ. ዶ/ር አብይ አሕመድ በመልካም ወጣት መዝጊያ ጥርግራም ላይ ያደረጉት ድንቅ ንግግር’ (‘The Speech PM Abiy Ahmed made during the closing ceremony of the Melkam Wetat/Youth Coach Training’), *Marsil TV Worldwide*, 8 September 2019. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCQ9132HOIY>; and Office of the Prime Minister—Ethiopia, X post, 18 October 2019, 5.21 p.m., <https://x.com/pmethiopia/status/1185214446030983168>.

Protestants. In response to this perception, Abiy publicly clarified that his government is neither aligned with Protestants, Muslims, Orthodox Christians nor the *Waqefena* (Oromo traditional belief) movement. He also asserted a secular public identity and urged Protestant leaders not to claim the government as their own.⁴⁶

Government interference in religious affairs

In direct contrast to the initial role Abiy played in uniting the church in June through August 2018, the EOTC position later came full circle to blame the government for fostering internal church schisms as part of a broader strategy to undermine its role in national life. This is expressed first and foremost in terms of the emergence of the Oromo Orthodox Church. The tensions between the EOTC and the Abiy administration partly emerged as a reflection of the broader political dynamics within which church schisms were situated, with government engagement varying accordingly.

Two primary reasons inform discontent in the Oromia Orthodox Church: 1) failure to conduct church services in local native languages, leading to the loss of church members to other denominations, mostly Protestant; and 2) lack of ethnic diversity and inclusion in the church hierarchy, with the overwhelming majority of EOTC bishops being Amhara. A September 2019 proposal by Oromo Orthodox clerics for a regional ecclesiastical unit to address these issues and align EOTC structures with the Ethiopian federal system was rejected by the central synod as politically charged.⁴⁷ By January 2023, however, the demand for ecclesiastical self-administration resurfaced with unprecedented intensity, sparking a crisis that reverberated across the nation. Under the leadership of Abune Sawiros, on 22 January 2023, three Oromo Archbishops—Abune Sawiros, Abune Eustatheos and Abune Zena Markos—declared an independent Oromia synod in Weliso, named the Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities.⁴⁸

On 31 January 2023, reflecting the seriousness of the national situation, Abiy addressed both the cabinet and the public.⁴⁹ In addition to denying any government involvement in the Oromia

46 'ጠ/ጊ ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) ከኢትዮጵያ ወንጌላዊያን አብያተ-ክርስቲያናት ካውንስልና አባል አብያተ-ክርስቲያናት ተወካዮች ጋር ያደረጉት ውይይት' ('Meeting between PM Abiy Ahmed and representatives of the Ethiopian Evangelical Council'), *Fana Television*, 17 March 2024. Accessed 28 January 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_ViXFfmm-w.

47 'Ethiopian Orthodox Church followers marched in several towns, oppose targeted attacks', *Borkena*, 22 September 2019. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2019/09/22/ethiopian-orthodox-church-followers-marched-in-several-townsoppose-targeted-attacks/>.

48 Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 'EPO February 2023 Monthly: Religious Disputes and Government Involvement in Ethiopia', ACLED, 8 March 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/03/08/epo-february-2023-monthly-religious-disputes-and-government-involvement-in-ethiopia/>.

49 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አህመድ በሰላምና ሀይማኖታዊ ጉዳዮች ዙሪያ የሰጡት ማብራሪያ' ('PM Abiy Ahmed briefs on peace and religious issues'), *Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation*, 31 January 2024. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjeYHBI57Kg>. Subsequent references to this address are derived from this source unless otherwise specified.

crisis and emphasizing steps already taken to ensure greater church autonomy, Abiy highlights that it is a constitutional right to request services in one's own language. Adding a distinctly political dimension to the ethnic dynamics at play in the Oromo schism, he goes on to note that the long-standing failure of the Orthodox Church to provide services in Afaan Oromoo could render the church vulnerable to manipulation by political or ethnic interest groups.



UNDERLYING FACTORS FOR TENSIONS

The alliance between the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the administration led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali was driven by two key ideological alignments. First, in the early years of political reform (2018–2020), the Abiy administration aligned itself with the pan-Ethiopianist camp, which the EOTC also occupied.⁵⁰ Second, the alliance was also supported by the millenarian and messianic beliefs that portrayed Abiy as a divine figure tasked with leading a grand transformation of Ethiopian society.

This alliance, however, quickly proved fragile and short lived, giving way to tensions and confrontation. Structural forces, shaped by both historical and competing political, religious and ethnic dynamics, played a significant role in the subsequent conflict dynamics that emerged between the EOTC and the Prosperity Party administration. Four underlying factors contribute to these tensions: 1) the security crisis; 2) declining EOTC hegemony; 3) administration tendencies to mix religion and politics; and 4) the role of ethnicity in EOTC schisms.

THE SECURITY CRISIS

The legitimacy of the Abiy administration is increasingly questioned amid escalating ethnic and religious conflicts in Ethiopia, which are further overlaid with significant historical burdens. While many of these conflicts have ethnic roots, they often have religious overtones, with religious institutions and places of worship frequently targeted.⁵¹

In particular, Amhara Orthodox Christians feel doubly affected due to the overlapping dynamics related to their ethnic and religious identities. The Amhara are predominantly Orthodox: 82 per

50 The two main rivals to power—the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo nationalists outside the Prosperity Party—were critical of Abiy’s Ethiopianist rhetoric. This was strengthened by signals from his administration in 2019 that it might seek constitutional amendments, including the re-organization of the ethno-federal political system, a system that Tigrayan and Oromo nationalists strongly supported.

51 Terje Østebø, Jörg Hausteijn, Fasika Gedif, Muhammad Jemal Kadir, Kedir Jemal and Yihenew Alemu Tesfaye, ‘Religion, ethnicity and charges of extremism: The dynamics of inter-communal violence in Ethiopia’, Brussels: European Institute of Peace, 2021. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebø-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf>.

cent, according to the 2007 census.⁵² They have also been victims of ethnic violence, especially in Oromia, the south and Benishangul-Gumuz. Muslim Amharas have likewise faced attacks, particularly those who resettled in Oromia. Many Amhara Orthodox Christians view these attacks both in terms of ethnic violence and as an assault on their religious identity, in particular in areas with Muslim or Protestant majorities.⁵³

This sense of vulnerability is heightened by the historical perception of the Amhara as descendants of the *neftegna* (gun bearer). While the term '*neftegna*' literally means 'gun bearer', it is also historically associated with the Amhara ruling class and the oppression they imposed during imperial rule in Ethiopia (1889–1974). In contemporary discourse, especially among ethnic nationalists, the term is used to refer to the Amhara as a minority group to justify their mistreatment.⁵⁴ This perception has also contributed to the widespread violence, killings and forced evictions of the Amhara population and Orthodox Christians.⁵⁵ Although this view of Amharas as descendants of the *neftegna* is often oversimplified—especially given the Derg-era resettlement of many drought-affected Amhara to non-Amhara regions as well as spontaneous internal migration, predominantly from the north to the south—it has nevertheless fuelled resentment, making the Amhara a target of violence and discrimination.

A key factor driving ethnically targeted killings in Ethiopia is the ethno-federal political system put in place since 1995, which has fostered divisive categories of 'natives' and 'outsiders' across the regions. For example, both the preamble and Article 8 of the Oromia regional constitution declare that the Oromo nation is the rightful owner of the region. A similar exclusionary definition of political rights is found in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional constitution. The Ethiopian ethno-federal system recognizes the group rights of historic minorities, while offering little support to the new minorities it has created. This framework has led to the division of groups into titular and non-titular categories,⁵⁶ fostering a citizenship regime with differentiated rights. These distinctions have exacerbated ethnic tensions, often resulting in the marginalization of and violence against non-titular groups. Human rights organizations have documented numerous targeted killings, especially in western Oromia and parts of the south.⁵⁷

52 Central Statistics Authority. The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia. Accessed 15 July 2024, https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-2007-National_Statistical.pdf

53 Focus group discussion with Orthodox Christians, Addis Ababa, 12 October 2024.

54 Meskerem Abera, 'በወለጋ የአማርኛ ለልቂት እና የመጥፋት አቅጣጫዎች' #Ethio_Nikat_Media_Ethiopia Ethio Nikat Media_#Meskerem Abera' ('Amhara massacre in Wellega and direction to solve the problem'), *Ethio Nikat Media*, 27 June 2022. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Tmv6U6-afs>.

55 Meskerem, 'በወለጋ'.

56 Asnake Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia. A Comparative Regional Study*, Oxon UK and New York: Routledge, 2013.

57 'Ethiopia: Authorities must investigate massacre of ethnic Amhara in Tole', Amnesty International, 21 July 2022. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/ethiopia-authorities-must-investigate-massacre-of-ethnic-amhara-in-tole/>.

The overlapping ethnic and religious boundaries (Amhara–Orthodox) and the perception of the EOTC as a symbol of imperial oppression in most of the east, south and western parts of Ethiopia, where Orthodox Christians are the minority, informs the ethnically and religiously targeted violence.

Since 2019, the rise of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) insurgency in Oromia has further exacerbated these dynamics. Some reports suggest that the OLA has deliberately used violence against the Amhara minority,⁵⁸ apparently to create divisions between the Abiy administration and his pan-Ethiopian Amhara-aligned constituency. This tactic seemed especially pronounced in the initial years of the Abiy administration, as political dynamics shifted and competing forces sought to influence the future direction of Ethiopia. This strategy of targeting the Amhara both undermined the efforts of the Abiy administration to forge a stronger sense of national unity and deepened the ethnic and political rifts in the country.⁵⁹

Government inaction in the face of growing ethno-religious violence can be attributed to several factors. First, the institutional weakness of and instability in the Ethiopian security sector following the removal of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from power created a power vacuum. This led to a fragmented military and intelligence apparatus, which hindered government abilities to respond to the worsening security situation.⁶⁰ Second, the government may have allowed communal violence instigated by the OLA to persist as a political strategy, aiming to weaken the group by fuelling public anger against it.⁶¹ This approach came at significant moral, humanitarian and legitimacy costs, however, leaving affected communities vulnerable and unprotected. It also broke trust and exacerbated existing tensions.

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- 58 For instance, Amnesty International reports that survivors of the ethnically targeted violence against ethnic Amhara in Guliso District, West Wellega Zone, on 1 November 2020, stated that the attackers identified themselves as members of the OLA. 'Ethiopia: Over 50 ethnic Amhara killed in attack on village by armed group', Amnesty International, 2 November 2020. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/ethiopia-over-50-ethnic-amhara-killed-in-attack-on-village-by-armed-group/>. Similarly, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission reports that OLA fighters killed 17 people and burned down villages in Benishangul-Gumuz, which borders the Oromia region, and another 30 people were killed in Arsi zone (in Oromia) in a series of attacks in December 2023. *Agence France-Presse*, 'Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Says Over 50 Killed in Regional Attacks', VOA, 6 December 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.voafrika.com/a/ethiopian-human-rights-commission-says-over-50-killed-in-regional-attacks/7386673.html>.
- 59 'Ethiopian Human Rights Commission', VOA.
- 60 Semir Yusuf, 'Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia', Monograph 202, Pretoria: December 2019. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono-202-2.pdf>.
- 61 For instance, the Guliso attack occurred just a day after Ethiopian Defense Forces unexpectedly withdrew from the area without explanation. The absence of a government investigation into the violence further raises concerns about potential government complicity. Amnesty International highlighted this issue, stating, 'The fact that this horrendous incident occurred shortly after government troops abruptly withdrew from the area in unexplained circumstances raises questions that must be answered.' Amnesty International, 'Ethiopia: Over 50 ethnic Amhara killed'.

Third, the fusion of religious and secular governance in the current administration, *inter alia* influenced by millenarian ideas and excessive positive thinking, shaped the lack of an adequate government response to the violence. Belief in the inevitable socio-economic transformation of Ethiopia through divine guidance has led to a focus on positive thinking that obscures the need for immediate action to address the violence. In downplaying political violence, this ideological approach further reflects the tendency to focus on optimism over practical solutions and simultaneously fosters a problematic tolerance for suffering in pursuit of perceived greater goods. By focusing on positive thinking and optimistic visions of the future, the Abiy administration may have been unwilling to engage with the more immediate and tangible demands for security and justice, assuming that a broader societal transformation would eventually correct these issues.⁶²

DECLINING EOTC HEGEMONY

Despite its political decline in the last half century, the EOTC is still the largest religious community in Ethiopia. According to the most recent census (in 2007), it comprises 43.5 per cent of the population, followed by Muslims (33.9 per cent) and Protestants (18.6 per cent).⁶³ Nonetheless, a major concern for the EOTC is the growth rate of other religious communities, especially Protestants. While Orthodox Christianity and Islam remain the two largest religions in Ethiopia, Protestantism has experienced significant growth in recent decades, especially in traditionally Orthodox areas. From a little more than 5.0 per cent in the 1984 census, to 18.6 per cent in the 2007 census, the Protestant population was 27.4 per cent according to the 2019 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS).⁶⁴ In contrast, the EOTC population has declined from 54.0 per cent in the 1984 census to 41.5 per cent in the 2019 EDHS.⁶⁵

Diminishing EOTC power and the challenges the church faces (competition from religious minorities; ethnic tensions leading to violence; shifting government policies) must be understood in the broader context of long-term state reforms that have reshaped the religious landscape of Ethiopia. In particular, these have lifted restrictions on religious expression and eroded historical EOTC dominance in the interests of pluralism and inclusion. With Protestantism the fastest growing religious community in Ethiopia, this has intensified tensions and created demographic anxiety among Orthodox Christians. Most of this demographic growth is due to Protestant proselytizing strategies (notably, preaching in local languages) and the promise of immediate solutions to problems in the context of a deepening economic crisis and the corresponding sense of deprivation.

In terms of Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia, the EOTC primarily views this as a security issue.

62 Dereje, 'The return of religion'.

63 CSA Ethiopia, 'The 2007 Census'.

64 Ethiopian Public Health Institute and ICF, 'Ethiopia Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2019: Final Report', Addis Ababa and Rockville MD: EPHI and ICF, 2021. Accessed 18 March 2025, <https://ephi.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Final-Mini-DHS-report-FR363.pdf>.

65 Ethiopian Public Health Institute and ICF, 'Mini Survey'.

Since 1991, the increased visibility and civil rights activism of the Muslim community, driven by Islamic reform movements, has fuelled suspicion, especially among Christians. Fears of Islamic extremism, supported by rumours of Saudi influence and political ambitions, have intensified. These concerns are deeply rooted in Ethiopian history, especially the sixteenth century conquest of the Christian empire by Imam Ahmad al Ghazi of the Sultanate of Adal. This event has left lasting trauma, which is sometimes described as the ‘Ahmad Grañ syndrome’, or the legacy of fear, suspicion and the demonization of Islam in Ethiopia.⁶⁶ This fear was perpetuated by subsequent emperors, such as Tewodros II (1855–1868) and Yohannes IV (1872–1889), who sought to undermine Islam in Ethiopia. For instance, the Edict of Boru Meda, announced by Yohannes in 1878, forced Muslims to convert or die.⁶⁷ Although Menelik II (1889–1906) demonstrated a more tolerant attitude towards Islam, Islamic identity had solidified in opposition to Christian rule. In contemporary Ethiopia, these historical fears, combined with rising political activism among Muslims, have heightened interfaith tensions, posing challenges for the EOTC.⁶⁸

Underlying the debate on history and symbolism between the EOTC and increasingly empowered religious minorities, there is a long-standing imbalance in access to education, political power, military influence, economic resources and cultural representation. For centuries, the EOTC enjoyed a privileged position in the Ethiopian state, with Orthodox Christians occupying most key positions in government, military and cultural institutions as well as having greater access to state-mediated resources such as land. This dominance was reinforced by close church–state relations, which was integral to the political and ideological identity of the Christian empire. In regions where they were in the minority, Muslims often encountered discrimination and marginalization, while Protestants were viewed with suspicion and actively persecuted, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁹ The challenges to the historical religious imbalance in Ethiopia—driven by political changes such as the 1974 revolution, the rise of ethnic federalism and increased religious pluralism—have given rise to growing tensions. As marginalized religious groups have gained more political influence and greater access to resources, the traditionally privileged EOTC position has been undermined, sparking fears of the church losing its dominance. The rise of political activism in minority religious communities and their increasing representation in government and public life has intensified these tensions, as the EOTC grapples with adapting to a more pluralistic society in which its historical monopoly is no longer secure.

66 Haggai Erlich, *Islam & Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia*, Boulder CO: Lynne Reiner, 2010.

67 Donald Crummey, ‘Orthodoxy and imperial reconstruction in Ethiopia 1854–1878’, *Journal of Theological Studies* XXIX/2 (1978).

68 Dereje Feyissa and Meron Zeleke, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church in the Context of State Reformation’. *Northeast African Studies* 22/2 (2022).

69 For example, see: Tibebe Teshale, *The evangelical movement in Ethiopia—resilience and resistance*, Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2009.

Interfaith tension and conflict is not, then, merely about religious narratives and symbolism but also reflects deep-rooted structural inequalities and the challenges posed by the erosion of historical power imbalances. The characterization of the Prosperity Party as both ‘*ye Pente mengist*’ (a government of Protestants) and ‘*ye Islam mengist*’ (a government of Muslims)⁷⁰ is part of a broader trajectory of EOTC decline, and the political and demographic anxieties tied to that shift. What may appear as a balancing act by the government—for example, the use of public spaces such as Meskel Square by religious minorities—is perceived by many as a sign of government disfavour towards Orthodox Christians. This deep-seated sense of insecurity is a function of both the changing balance of power and EOTC reactions to the corresponding loss of its hegemonic status, as this occurs in a changing political system defined by complex ethnic dynamics.

MIXING RELIGION AND POLITICS

Amidst EOTC efforts to reclaim its central role in Ethiopian society, it is historically significant that Abiy is the second Protestant prime minister of Ethiopia (moreover at a time that Protestantism is expanding). Whereas the first Protestant prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn (2012–2018), largely kept his faith private,⁷¹ the Prosperity Party administration led by Abiy takes a markedly different approach, amplifying the influence of religion in state affairs (notwithstanding the official separation of church and state in the constitution).⁷² Initially, this shift was viewed as positive but this quickly changed as Abiy’s political speeches and messages became increasingly infused with religious references and it became known that some Protestant leaders and self-proclaimed prophets refer to him as ‘the elect of God’.⁷³ Greater emphasis on religion has also drawn attention to Abiy’s own personal religious affiliation, which has come under increased scrutiny.

70 In a curious twist, some Orthodox Christians and other opposition figures view Abiy, openly a Pentecostal Christian, as a secret Muslim, a misperception shaped by complex religious–political dynamics. This view intensified with the formation of the Prosperity Party, when the religious affiliations of its regional representatives sparked backlash. Of the initial eight party representatives, five were Muslim, while Abiy and Demeke Mekonnen, representing the Oromia and Amhara regions, respectively, have Muslim backgrounds. This composition merely reflects regional demographics but nonetheless led to the impression that the Prosperity Party was Muslim dominated, despite the proportional power structure of the party favouring Oromia and Amhara. Some Fano (an ethnonationalist Amhara militia) leaders, such as Mesafint Tesfu, have also rejected the current government based on Abiy’s Muslim background, reflecting deep suspicion about Muslim political power in Ethiopia.

71 He simply continued the policies of Meles Zenawi, including EPRDF efforts to diminish the role of religion in public life, which reflects its ideological roots in socialist thought.

72 Jörg Hausteine, ‘The New Prime Minister’s Faith: A Look at Oneness Pentecostalism in Ethiopia’, *PentecoStudies* 12/2 (December 2013). DOI:10.1558/ptcs.v12i2.1832013.

73 ‘የብልጽግና ፓስተርቶና ወንጌላዊያን፣ ከጊሊሊዩም አዳራሽ አስከ መስቀል አደባባይ’ (‘Prosperity Pastors and Evangelicals— from Millennium Hall to Meskel Square’), *Ethio Forum*, 17 March 2024. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMI1ckwTpbE&t=16s>.

The core issue lies in what may be termed the ‘Pentecostalization of Ethiopian politics’.⁷⁴ As a vocal government critic explains: ‘One of the most dangerous developments that has occurred since PM Abiy came to power is the evangelical seduction of the nation’s political governance, getting advice and counsel from divine forces.’⁷⁵ This view is shaped by a government tendency to blend Pentecostal Christianity with political leadership. This is reflected in political decision-making and crisis management whereby religious analogical reasoning plays a significant role. For example, biblical stories are often cited as precedents for political decisions and government sources indicate that prayer serves as a crucial source of resilience.⁷⁶ Prayer is even used as a means of generating political agency and as a tool for risk management, particularly when the administration makes bold decisions.

The mainstreaming of positive thinking into the political framework of the Abiy administration also carries a distinctly Protestant influence. The administration frequently invokes the image of a God who never sleeps, guarding the Ethiopian polity to reassure the public and mitigate fears of disintegration, framing national challenges as spiritual battles in which divine protection is paramount. This religiously infused narrative has become a central part of the political discourse of the administration, shaping both its response to crises and its vision for national stability. While there is an ideological resonance between Orthodox and Protestant Christianity in their shared belief in divine protection, the mantra ‘Ethiopia will not disintegrate’, repeated in the face of a mounting security crisis, is viewed by many Orthodox Christians in terms of government attempts to justify its lack of response. Rather than addressing the crisis, it is seen as an effort to absolve the government of responsibility.

At the same time, however, the use of religious rhetoric to justify governance decisions has also heightened attention to religious identities and deepened divisions. For the EOTC, for example, Abiy’s tendency to mix religion and politics is not simply seen as a challenge to church authority. It is also viewed as an attempt to reshape the religious and political landscape in Ethiopia in a direction that favours Protestant ideals.⁷⁷

74 Jörg Haustein and Dereje Feyissa, ‘The strains of “Pente” politics: Evangelicals and the post-Orthodox state in Ethiopia’, in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, edited by Jean-Nicolas Bach, London: Routledge, 2022.

75 For example, see: Yonas Biru, ‘Get the Evangelical God Out of the Prime Minister’s Office’, *Borkena*, 20 August 2022. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/08/20/get-the-evangelical-god-out-of-the-prime-ministers-office/>; and Yonas Biru, ‘The Evangelization of the Ethiopian Political Governance Architecture’, *Borkena*, 22 March 2022. Accessed 27 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/03/22/the-evangelization-of-the-ethiopian-political-governance-architecture/>.

76 Interview with a senior government official, Addis Ababa, 23 September 2024.

77 EOTC fears of Protestant domination lack evidence. Both Muslims and Protestants are well represented in Abiy’s cabinet, as are Orthodox Christians, despite the perception that the EOTC is excluded from key political decisions.

THE POWER OF LEVERAGE

Leverage is a powerful tool that amplifies impact by using small resources to generate significant effects. When applied effectively, it enables a small group to create a ripple effect that drives social change, influences public opinion or sparks innovation. At its core, leverage maximizes impact—whether financially, socially or personally—turning modest efforts into far-reaching outcomes for those who know how to use it. The concept of leverage helps understand the changes in the relationship between the EOTC and the Abiy administration from cooperation to hostility. Recognizing the significant institutional power of the EOTC, both historically and demographically, the Abiy administration has strategically sought to leverage its influence. This includes positioning itself as a unifier when necessary, while also intervening in church affairs when deemed politically advantageous. To achieve a similar degree of control with the EOTC, the Abiy administration has employed two strategies: 1) conciliation, which included reconciling the central synod and the synod in exile, restoring church properties confiscated by the Derg and generously allocating land for new church construction; and 2) confrontation, particularly during the schism in Oromia.

Although the formation of the Oromia and Nations and Nationalities Synod on 22 January 2023 is not entirely the creation of the Abiy administration, as claimed by the Orthodox activists, government interference played a significant role during the various phases of the schism. This interference includes framing the split as a constitutionally sanctioned call for diversity, refusing to enforce the rule of law when the splinter group attempted to seize churches and providing government protection to ensure the security of the splinter group. Abiy administration interference in EOTC internal affairs, however, was not necessarily aimed at destroying the church. Instead, the goal appears to be to reshape the church in the image of the government, making it more malleable and easier to control, thus exemplifying the power of leverage.

This strategy was similarly applied to other religious institutions, such as the Mejlis (the representative body for Ethiopian Muslims) and the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers, with comparatively greater success. The EOTC central synod refusal to engage with Abiy's calls for negotiation between the two synods was perceived as an act of defiance and ingratitude, with Abiy going so far as to publicly list the favours his administration had granted the EOTC. The central synod refuted Abiy administration claims, stating that the allocation of land is not a favour but rather reflects religious demographics, especially in Addis Ababa where Orthodox Christians form the vast majority.⁷⁸

The EOTC is, however, a complex institution; for example, even church leadership does not exert full control over the church. When the schism emerged, primarily due to ethnic grievances, the Abiy administration once again positioned itself as a reconciler, adopting a position of bothsidesism (false balance) that the central synod deeply resented. This was

78 Mahibere Kidusan, 'MK TV || ወቅታዊ ጉዳይ || የቅዱስ ሲኖዶስ አስቸኳይ መግለጫ' ('The Holy Synod Urgent Press Release'), 1 February 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln_T11WTGnU.

viewed as defiance, threatening the alignment of the church with government interests. The adage ‘power seeks to control institutions, groups and individuals’ underscores the situation: The failure to exert control, or the lack of leverage, means someone else will step in to do so. Specifically, the Abiy administration is concerned that rival political forces, such as the TPLF and Amhara nationalists, could leverage the EOTC in their efforts to seize power or, at the very least, use it to exert pressure on the government.

A senior Oromia regional government official and member of the Prosperity Party offers further insight about government actions in relation to these internal EOTC religious matters. His comments reveal how the intersection of Amhara nationalism and Orthodox activism, along with the corresponding convergence of grievances between these communities, created opportunities for government interference:

After the defeat of General Asaminew Tsige and the disbanding of the Amhara Special Forces, Amhara nationalism found support within the EOTC, a powerful institution in Ethiopian society. Recognizing its influence, Abiy initially [in 2018] positioned the church as *hager nat* [the national church] to neutralize any threat. However, as Amhara nationalism increasingly aligned with the church, Abiy grew frustrated, feeling the church was ungrateful for his early support. This led him to back the Sawiros faction, aiming to pressure the central synod and weaken its ties to Amhara nationalism.⁷⁹

Government engagement in the Oromo schism is, then, as much a balancing act informed by a sensibility for ethnic diversity, as it is a measure to contain the perceived political infiltration of the EOTC by opposition figures. Daniel Kibiret, a close advisor to Abiy, is even more explicit about the legitimacy of the demand for vernacularization, directly framing EOTC resistance to diversity as politically motivated: An agitation by political networks embedded in church leadership, first citing TPLF-affiliated clerics and then clerics who espouse Amhara nationalism, with both working to undermine the government by inciting violence.⁸⁰

Hence Abiy’s inclination to engage (or interfere) in internal religious affairs of the EOTC. Not only did the schism in Oromia provide an opportunity for the government to align with the Sawiros faction, tacitly offering protection and a platform to challenge traditional church leadership, especially possible links with Amhara nationalism. It also reflects Abiy’s broader strategy for navigating the complex, shifting and sometimes volatile political landscape of Ethiopia—balancing power between ethnic factions, religious institutions and the central government. In essence, Abiy’s interference in church affairs appears driven by political self-interest and preservation, rather than religious motives; however, such interference contradicts the constitution.

79 Interview with member of the Oromia Prosperity Party, Addis Ababa, 15 June 2023.

80 ‘ዲያቆን ዳንኤል ከብረት ከሎዓላዊ ጋር’ (‘Daniel Kibiret with Lualawi Media’), *Lualawi*, 16 November 2024. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGzrZMfpqEKM>.

EOTC SCHISMS AND ETHNICITY

In the EOTC, ethnicity is a critical fault line, posing a direct challenge to church administrative structures and church unity. While the Abiy administration promised a politics of national unity, ethnicity continues to serve as a primary organizing framework for political identity in Ethiopia, influencing every aspect of life, including religious institutions. A case in point is the schism of the EOTC, creating two new synods: Tigray Orthodox Church and the Oromo Orthodox Church.

The complex relationship between the Tigray region and the federal government is mirrored in the EOTC, with Tigrayans long voicing dissatisfaction over how their religious and administrative concerns are handled by the central synod.⁸¹ Starting in 2021, this led to calls for a separate Tigrayan Orthodox church, or at least greater regional autonomy. The historical rivalry between Axum and Debre Libanos monastery as centres of Ethiopian Orthodoxy reflects these regional tensions.⁸² In 2005, a compromise was reached that recognizes both Axum and Debre Libanos as key spiritual centres. The title of the EOTC patriarch was then modified to include both ‘Archbishop of Axum’ and ‘*Ichege* (Abbot) of the See of Saint Teklehaimanot’, with the latter symbolizing the monastic roots of the church and the importance of Debre Libanos to EOTC history. This compromise acknowledges the dual heritage of Ethiopian Christianity, balancing the northern (Tigray) and southern (Amhara) legacies, while striving to preserve unity amid growing (ethnic) regionalism.⁸³

The recent decision by the Tigrayan Orthodox clergy to break away from the central synod is rooted in both ethno-political and war-related grievances.⁸⁴ During the war in Tigray, several prominent Amhara bishops openly expressed solidarity with the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the Amhara special forces and militias fighting against the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), condemning the TPLF in the strongest terms.⁸⁵ Patriarch Abune Mathias, a Tigrayan, publicly condemned the atrocities committed during the war, calling it a genocide

81 Interview with EOTC representative during the new religious policy consultation, Arbaminch, 22 August 2023.

82 Situated in the Tigray region, Axum is home to Our Lady Mary of Zion Church (an EOTC church), which claims to host the Ark of the Covenant. Founded in 1284 by Saint Teklehaimanot, a thirteenth century Amhara monk, Debre Libanos is an Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo monastery north-west of Addis Ababa in the North Shewa zone of the Oromia region.

83 Interview with EOTC representative during the new religious policy consultation, Arbaminch, 22 August 2023.

84 ‘#Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Briefing on Ethiopian Synod Statement of Condemnation’, *Tigray Television*, 3 August 2023. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaH9fDLnKI>.

85 The most controversial statement is from Abune Petros (secretary of the office of the EOTC patriarchate) who in 2016 says, it is ‘better working with the devil than seeing the TPLF come back to Arat Kilo’. See: Egziabhier Fered, ‘Abune Petros on the Ethiopian Genocide by TPLF’, *YouTube*, 12 September 2016. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpvomAJ3xz&t=120s>.

against the people of Tigray.⁸⁶ His remarks were, however, disavowed by Abune Yosef, the then general secretary of the EOTC, who indicated that the statements from the patriarch did not reflect the position of the central synod.⁸⁷ This divergence suggests that the political positions of the synod and the patriarch are ethnically informed.

Naming the new Tigray Orthodox Church Menbere Selama Kesate Birhan carries both political and symbolic weight, asserting historic Tigrayan claims to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in particular as the birthplace of the great tradition and national identity in Ethiopia. The Tigrayan clergy have long felt that the Amhara-dominated leadership in the EOTC has overshadowed the historical role of Tigray in shaping Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.⁸⁸ The naming dispute between Menbere Selama Kesate Birhan and Menbere Teklehaimanot (the official name of the EOTC synod) also underscores these deep ethnic tensions. Menbere Selama is viewed by Tigrayan Orthodox Christians as a nativist assertion of their ethnic identity, while Menbere Teklehaimanot is more closely associated with the Amhara. Although the Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church (TOTC) is named after St Frumentius, a fourth century Phoenician Christian missionary who introduced Christianity to the Axumite royal court, this historical event is often invoked to emphasize Tigrayan primacy within Orthodox Christianity. This is because Axum, as the location of the first Ethiopian bishopric under St Frumentius, holds the distinction of being the oldest See in the church. This reflects what can be described as the historical rivalry between these two dominant ethnic groups of the Abyssinian political class.⁸⁹ The title *Menbere Selama* suggests that Axum (and by extension, Tigray), not Debre Libanos (by implication, Amhara), has a direct and unbroken link to the apostles, a claim that resonates with local pride and historical identity. It is, however, contested by those who see it as revisionist.⁹⁰

Similarly, ethnicity was at play in the crisis related to the emergence of the Oromo Orthodox Church. In this case, a complex combination of long-standing demands for greater ethnic diversity in the EOTC, including linguistic pluralism and more inclusive representation in church leadership), ultimately led to a schism. The faction led by Archbishop Sawiros claims

86 'H.H. Patriarch Mathias of EOTC's message on #Tigray Genocide: LIVE with Mr. Dennis Wadley', *UMD Media*, 8 May 2021. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5a2NjgF-7cg>.

87 'Ethiopian Church remarks over Patriarch's video message about "Tigray Genocide"', *Borkena*, 10 May 2021. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2021/05/10/ethiopian-church-remarks-over-patriarchs-video-message-about-tigray-genocide/>.

88 The separatist claims of the Tigray church were further justified by historical grievances, including the persecution of the Stephanite monks in the fifteenth century by Emperor Zerayacob (mainly based in Tigray). Also see: 'DW TV ቃለ መጠይቅ ከብጹህ አቡነ መርሃ ከርሱቶስ የምስራቅ ትግራይ ዓጲ ግራት ሃገረሰብከት ሊቀ ጳጳስ አና የትግራይ ኢህጉረ ስብከት ጉባኤ ጊዜያዊ ሰብሳቢ' ('DW interview with Abune Merhakiristos, Archbishop of Eastern Tigray'), *Dimtsi Weyane Television*, 13 February 2022. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mAhRLfjI2s>.

89 Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia. The evolution of a multiethnic society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

90 Interview with a member of the Mahibere Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2024.

that 85 per cent of EOTC bishops are Amhara.⁹¹ Whereas the Sawiros faction saw ethnicity as the primary reason to leave the EOTC, the central synod framed the issue as one of authority and church dogma, with Sawiros and his followers excommunicated on this basis on 26 January 2023.⁹² A key factor behind the schism was the increasing dominance of Gondar-based Amhara bishops, who had returned from exile in the United States after the merger of the two synods in 2018. Many of these bishops, including influential figures in the church hierarchy such as Abune Petros (previously archbishop of the EOTC New York diocese), had become disconnected from changing political and ethnic dynamics in Ethiopia while they were in exile.⁹³

Given long-standing demands among Oromo clerics for diversity and greater inclusion in the church hierarchy, the root cause of this schism is the ethno-structural forces at work in the church. Historically, the core EOTC constituency has been in the northern highlands. As such Amhara (and to some extent Tigrayan) clerics have played dominant roles in the affairs of the church. Amharic is used in the church liturgy, along with Ge'ez and Tigrigna in Tigray. The demand for diversity on the part of Oromia church members appears to have threatened this northern hegemony. In particular, it parallels the gradual shift of political and economic power from the north to the south in the process of state (re)formation, which has been set in motion since the 1974 revolution.

In addition to challenging Amharic linguistic hegemony, Oromo Orthodox clerics also began to make claims on senior church leadership positions. For instance, in 2022, Abune Sawiros for the first time competed as an Oromo cleric for the top post in the office of the patriarchate but lost to Abune Abraham, a bishop from Bahir Dar, capital of the Amhara region.⁹⁴ Tensions related to the ethnic composition of church leadership became more complex after the death of Abune Michael, the Oromo archbishop of Illubabor, in January 2022. His death, officially attributed to COVID-19 but fuelled by conspiracy theories, heightened fears among the Sawiros faction that they too would be poisoned.⁹⁵ The grievance of Oromo clerics about being marginalized in EOTC leadership is situated within the broader Oromo ethnic discourse of political marginalization in the affairs of the Ethiopian state and society.

Given that the majority of Amhara are Orthodox Christians, the convergence of Amhara nationalism and Orthodox activism represents a potent ethno-political mix in terms of church dynamics (which also reverberates across government). This was especially the case after the 2 November 2022 signing of the Ethiopia–Tigray Cessation of Hostilities agreement and the

91 'ከአባ ሳውሮስ ጋር የተደረገ ቆይታ' ('Interview with Archbishop Sawiros'), *Yegna Tv*, 24 January 2023. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9RNpWBR7c>.

92 This decision was, however, reversed on 30 July 2023, as a result of government intervention.

93 Interview with an Oromo Orthodox sympathizer of the Sawiros faction, Addis Ababa, 28 August 2023.

94 'The Holy Synod elected Abune Abraham as Head of the Patriarchate office', *Borkena*, 1 June 2022. Accessed 30 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/06/01/holy-synod-abune-abraham-head-of-the-patriarchate-office/>.

95 Interview with an Oromo Orthodox sympathetic to the Sawiros faction, Addis Ababa, 20 August 2023.

realignment of forces connected to that.⁹⁶ Amhara nationalism has spiked since the controversy surrounding the disbanding of regional special forces in April 2023 and the fear of Amhara vulnerability to the still armed Tigray Defense Forces that might ultimately decide on the political fate of the disputed territories between the Amhara and Tigray regions. In turn, this is situated within the much larger political context of the intense hegemonic rivalry between Oromo and Amhara nationalists in post-EPRDF Ethiopia as well as the significant overlap between ethnic and religious boundaries.

This narrative is deeply tied to the wider political struggle between Oromo and Amhara elites in post-EPRDF Ethiopia, with the current administration increasingly perceived as dominated by the Oromo wing of the Prosperity Party. What initially appeared to be a strategic political alliance between Oromo and Amhara factions, united in their opposition to the TPLF, quickly unravelled. The collapse of this alliance underscores the fragile and contested nature of the new political order that began in 2018. The effort to establish a rival synod can thus be viewed as a reflection of increasing Oromo demands for a larger role in the socio-political landscape of Ethiopia, which has traditionally been dominated by the Amharas and Tigrayans.

96 An agreement between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF to end the war, it is also known as the Pretoria Agreement or the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA).

FORMS OF EOTC POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Since the 1974 revolution, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has faced a defensive struggle against state (re)formation efforts. The political reforms ushered in with the 2018 political liberalization have intensified this situation. In response, the church has sought to reverse its declining influence and status, safeguard the Orthodox faithful and reclaim its historically dominant position in Ethiopian society. To achieve this, the EOTC has resisted government interference in its internal affairs, including attempts to address long-standing inequalities between religious communities. The church has also pushed back against the growing influence and visibility of religious minorities in public spaces. In particular, Orthodox activists have intensified efforts to re-imagine the Ethiopian nation through a distinctly Orthodox lens, reinforcing the hegemonic role of the church in national identity.

MOBILIZING FOR UNITY AND RESISTANCE

The EOTC has variously mobilized against what it perceives as government interference and competition from other religious communities. The Oromia schism provides valuable insight into the political mobilization efforts by the church, showcasing its ability to leverage both internal resources and support from the global Orthodox community.

The numerical strength of the EOTC was a significant bargaining chip in negotiations with the government, particularly since Orthodox Christians make up around 75 per cent of the population in Addis Ababa. The EOTC also tapped into its cultural infrastructure to signal to the faithful that it was facing an existential threat. Practices such as *maq melibes* (wearing black clothes by the church members as a symbol of perseverance in suffering) and ringing church bells were used to communicate this message. The synod also had a vocal leader in Abune Petros, who had experience mobilizing the Orthodox diaspora, particularly during the EPRDF regime.

The synod made some strategic errors, however. Overwhelmed by a massive turnout, it focused too much on a one-time demonstration rather than adopting gradual long-term mobilization strategies. In addition, the church overpromised, claiming divine guidance from the Holy Spirit, which led to unrealistic expectations. The mobilization ultimately lost momentum when the government outmanoeuvred the church, negotiating a settlement that could be described as a partial victory. While the split was avoided, the government succeeded in pushing for the reintegration of the dissenting Oromo clerics into the church structure, securing significant concessions from the synod, including the increased use of Oromiffa in church services and training.

Reflecting the intensity of the confrontation between the EOTC and the Abiy administration during the Oromia schism, the central EOTC synod describes this situation as a ‘*coup d’état* on the Synod’ under the auspices of the government.⁹⁷ The church strongly refuted Abiy’s statements about the EOTC schism, criticizing what church leaders perceived as a false equivalency between the two factions and accusing the government of failing to uphold the rule of law and protect church property rights. On 1 February 2023, the EOTC issued an ultimatum to the government, demanding that it fulfil its constitutional duties by upholding: 1) the institutional supremacy of the church; 2) protecting the rights and interests granted to it by law; and 3) addressing the illegal actions of the breakaway archbishops.⁹⁸ The central synod further threatened to organize a worldwide protest if corrective measures were not implemented.

As breakaway bishops began taking control of churches across Oromia, the central synod intensified its resistance by calling on the faithful to show solidarity. During the Fast of Nineveh (6–9 February 2023), EOTC church leadership urged followers to wear black as a symbol of protest against both the schism and government interference.⁹⁹ The plan was for this call to action to culminate in a mass demonstration on 12 February 2023 under the rallying cry ‘One Synod, One Patriarch’. Widely supported across Ethiopia, the planned demonstration garnered endorsement from a broad spectrum of society, including artists, cultural leaders and political figures.

Synod calls for unity and resistance also received significant international backing. The World Council of Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches expressed their full support for the EOTC position.¹⁰⁰ This international endorsement further strengthened the EOTC stance in the face of the crisis. As the situation intensified, EOTC church members in Oromia defended their churches when the breakaway faction attempted to seize them by force. In Shashemene, a key flashpoint in the conflict, local communities confronted the Oromia regional special security forces that were sent in to support the breakaway churches.¹⁰¹ On 4 February 2023, resistance turned violent and around eight people lost their lives in clashes with the regional security

97 Eliab Tsegaye, ‘Non-Violent methods restored the unity and independence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church’, World Peace Foundation, 21 February 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/non-violent-methods-restored-the-unity-and-independence-of-the-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahdo-church/>.

98 Mahibere Kidusan, ‘MK TV || ወቅታዊ ጉዳይ’.

99 ‘Orthodox Synod declares faithful to wear black for Fast of Nineveh to protest against “illegal group”’, Addis Standard, 3 February 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-orthodox-synod-declares-faithful-to-wear-black-for-fast-of-nineveh-to-protest-against-illegal-group/>.

100 Jerry Pillay, ‘WCC expresses solidarity with Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, World Council of Churches, 3 February 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-expresses-solidarity-with-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church>.

101 ‘Eight killed by government forces in Shashamane’s Orthodox Church dispute says EHRC’, *Ethiopia Today*, 10 February 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://ethiopiaday.net/eight-killed-by-government-forces-in-shashamanes-orthodox-church-dispute-says-ehrc/>.

forces.¹⁰² This event further galvanized support for the central EOTC synod, drawing attention both to the escalating violence and the EOTC struggle to preserve unity and autonomy against external (government) pressures.

Tensions began to decrease after EOTC leadership met with Abiy on 10 February 2023. On 11 February 2023, the central synod indefinitely postponed the demonstrations planned for 12 February based on government commitments to help address and resolve the key issues related to the schism. On 15 February 2023, Abiy intervened to broker a deal between the synod and the three dissident Oromo bishops. Accompanied by senior government officials and mediators, he led the bishops to the patriarchate, claiming he had ‘brought the lost sheep’ back.¹⁰³ The synod and the breakaway archbishops announced they had resolved their differences, ending a nearly month-long schism that threatened church unity through constructive discussion and in accordance with the canon of the church. In a joint statement, both parties reached a consensus on addressing language issues in church services—specifically the increased use of *Afaan Oromoo*.¹⁰⁴ This issue had been a catalyst for the schism after the three bishops unilaterally ordained 26 bishops, leading to their excommunication.

The agreement included measures to strengthen the use of *Afaan Oromoo* in churches across Oromia and allocate additional resources for these efforts. The church also planned to expand services in local languages and assign clergy who could better serve their communities. The three archbishops agreed to return to their former dioceses and titles, and the bishops they ordained would be reinstated to their previous positions.

In a separate statement, the synod expressed gratitude to Abiy for his crucial role in resolving the issue in keeping with church canon.¹⁰⁵ In his remarks following the agreement, Abiy celebrates the success and adds, ‘What remains is to quickly go to Tigray and bring the rest. We want you to be united.’¹⁰⁶ With this move, Abiy positioned himself as a unifier of the church, effectively reshaping his image from that of a divider.

The central synod also made several strategic errors in its political mobilization against the

102 ‘የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶች ሳይባሉ አፋጣኝ መፍትሔ የማፈላለጥ ሥራ ሊጠናከር ይገባል’ (‘Need for an immediate solution before the human rights situation further deteriorates’), Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, press release, 10 February 2023. Accessed 31 January 2025, <https://ehrc.org/y/s/0/1/አዊ-መ/ብ/ቶ/ች-ጥ/ሰ/ቶ/ች-ሳ/ይ/ባ/ሉ-አ/ፋ/ጣ/ኝ>.

103 ‘በኢትዮጵያ አርቶዳክስ ተዋህዶ ቤተክርስቲያን አባቶች መካከል ተፈጥሮ የነበረው አለመግባባት በንግግርና ውይይት ተፈታ’ (The misunderstanding among Orthodox Christians fathers is resolved’), *Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation*, 15 February 2023. Accessed 28 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9HRgbvVjBs>.

104 ‘በኢትዮጵያ አርቶዳክስ ተዋህዶ ቤተክርስቲያን አባቶች መካከል የተፈጠረው አለመግባባት ተፈታ’, *Fana Television*, 15 February 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ-SCT4w2VY>.

105 EOTC Broadcasting Service Agency, Facebook post, 15 February 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, https://web.facebook.com/eotctvchannel/posts/pfbid0SANGhyPArqBBV6BqWuGAjAbxTfxFwzhWhypEu3VbPEzntDDHLCp57fLNHKxvnehNI?_rdc=1&&_rdc.

106 EOTC Broadcasting Service Agency, Facebook post.

government. Initially, the EOTC framed government actions as divinely inspired but this narrative lost credibility as desired EOTC outcomes failed to materialize—specifically, calling off the planned demonstration on 12 February 2023; government refusal to label the dissident bishops as ‘illegal’ and its rejection of the schism as a *coup d’état*. In response, the synod was forced to shift its position, ultimately recognizing the core demand of the dissidents for greater diversity—particularly the increased use of *Afaan Oromoo* in church services—as both legitimate and desirable. As a result, the church emerged much weakened from the crisis sparked by the Oromo schism, while the government consolidated its power and grip over the affairs of the church.

Against church efforts to mobilize unity, ultimately the government appeared to be the unifying force. That is, following intense diplomatic efforts, the two church factions reconciled under the auspices of Abiy, who personally mediated the agreement. The terms of this reconciliation remain uncertain, however, raising questions about how lasting this peace will be. In April 2024, for example, during consultations between Abiy and the Orthodox community (the synod and representatives from the regions), members of the Sawiros faction complained about gaps in implementing the February 2023 agreement. Consequent to this, some members of the faction attempted to launch a second schism in August 2023.¹⁰⁷

Tensions among EOTC leaders grew, particularly over concessions the synod made to the government during the Oromia schism and government military actions in Amhara. In December 2023, Archbishop Abune Lukas of the EOTC in Australia, sharply criticized the Abiy administration, condemning government military actions in Amhara and comparing them to the biblical story of David and Goliath, along with accusing Abiy of opposing the EOTC.¹⁰⁸ Abune Lukas denounced the violence, including the killing of infants and attacks on monasteries, viewing these actions as efforts to undermine the church. He also criticized Abiy for manipulating Ethiopian bishops in exile, including the late Patriarch Abune Merkorios (1938–2022), with deceptive rhetoric, ultimately bringing harm to both the EOTC and the country as a whole. Comparing Abiy to Absalom, Abune Lukas then goes so far as to call on a ‘brave man’, who can, as David did, take a stand and slay Goliath (Abiy), asserting that: ‘Your

107 Government suppression of the second attempt to revive the Oromia synod project under the banner of Menbere Petros—named after the revered Oromo martyr Abune Petros, who resisted fascist Italy—highlights that its intervention in EOTC internal religious affairs was not aimed at dismantling the church, as some Orthodox activists claim. See: ‘Police detain seven bishops spearheading “Oromia Orthodox Synod” in Bishoftu’, *Addis Standard*, 31 August 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-police-detain-seven-bishops-spearheading-omoria-orthodox-synod-in-bishoftu/>.

108 ‘አቡነ ሉቃስ:- Abune Lukas Speech on Abiy Ahmed’, *Home of Abyssinia*, 3 January 2024. Accessed 31 January 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_kBgox_Hvo. Unless otherwise specified, comments made by Abune Lukas, including quoted material, in this paragraph are derived from this source.

courage will be remembered in Ethiopian history, written in gold for generations to come.¹⁰⁹

In response to these criticisms, the government filed a lawsuit against Abune Lukas for defamation and incitement to violence. Abune Lukas countered by stating that Ethiopia lacks a legitimate government under the rule of law, and if there were rule of law, the government itself should be sued first.¹¹⁰ Tensions escalated further when Abune Petros, secretary of the office of the EOTC patriarchate, was denied entry at Bole International Airport in February 2024. The EOTC synod condemned the disrespect shown to Abune Petros and the church, asserting that the church, as a sovereign entity, should not be bound by national identity, an issue that was mentioned during consultations with Abiy in April 2024.¹¹¹ On the second anniversary of the schism and his first year in exile, Abune Petros issued a statement urging Orthodox believers to persist in their struggle against a government determined to undermine the church.¹¹²

REIMAGINING AN ORTHODOX ETHIOPIA

As dissatisfaction with the moderate stance of the central EOTC synod grew, a more radical faction emerged in the EOTC. Known as the ‘*Moa Tawahedo*’ (The Winning Tawahedo), this faction condemned the central synod for making concessions to both the government and EOTC separatists. Led by influential Orthodox preachers such as Fantahun Waqe, Wondwosen Assefa and Zeratsion Sime, the *Moa Tawahedo* seeks to resist political and religious pressures, particularly from the government. The issues that this faction raises are, however, situated in relation to broader historical processes of EOTC decline vis-à-vis the government and the former religious minorities that have progressively gained more rights and greater public visibility. The *Moa Tawahedo* views the church as under attack and in a state of internal exile. The faction calls for countering the ideological forces that challenge the historically constituted EOTC hegemonic position in national affairs.¹¹³

The rhetoric of this group links the historical defeat of the West at Adwa and the role of the EOTC as a key pillar of Ethiopian national identity, positioning attacks on the church as part

109 The biblical story of Absalom is one of pride and greed. It is about a man who tried to overthrow the plan of God. His ambition and rebellion against his father, King David, not only led to his own demise but also brought turmoil to the kingdom of Israel.

110 ‘አቡነ ሉቃስ ይናገራል፤ ከቀዳሞው ውድቀት የአሁኑ ይከፋል’ (‘Abune Lukas speaks—current crisis worse than the previous government’) *Addisu Media*, 17 May 2024. Accessed 31 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReIWOxHIzII>.

111 ‘ጠ/ሚ ዐቢይ አላመድ (ዶ/ር) ከአትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተክርስቲያን ሲኖዶስና ከተለያዩ አካባቢዎች ከተውጣጡ የሌደማናት አባቶች ጋር ያደረጉት ውይይት’ (‘Meeting between PM Abiy Ahmed and members of the Orthodox Church community’), *Fana Television*, 14 March 2024. Accessed 31 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnNgHvtRmrl>.

112 ‘ሉዓላዊ-አቡነ ጳጥርስ እንደ አቡነ ሉቃስ!’ (‘Abune Petros as Abune Lukas!’), *Lualawi*, 12 February 2025. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Page6T2UPQ4&t=63s>.

113 ‘ሞዐ ተዋሕዶ ግብረ ኃይል ቤተክርስቲያን ስደት ላይ ነች’ (‘Moa Tawahido Taskforce—The Church is in exile’), *Tawahedo Media*, 9 February 2022. Accessed 31 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLMPonfS5fk>.

of a larger geopolitical struggle. They argue that the survival of Ethiopia is closely tied to the strength and unity of the EOTC: Anyone seeking to destroy Ethiopia must first attack the church. In December 2023, the *Moa Tawahedo* established a task force to address what it identifies as the structural, organizational and ideological attacks the EOTC has faced since the 1974 revolution. It has also played a pivotal role in the establishment of the International Orthodox Tewahedo Alliance (IOTA), an organization dedicated to advocating for the protection of the church and its followers. As part of its efforts, the IOTA published a book documenting what it describes as a 30-year attack on the EOTC, highlighting ongoing threats to its integrity and the challenges it faces both in Ethiopia and globally.¹¹⁴

Echoing the *Moa Tawahedo* project to renew EOTC hegemony, a new politically oriented group has emerged in the EOTC calling itself ‘Ethiopia—*ye Alem Birhan*’ (Ethiopia—Light of the World). This group blends Orthodox beliefs and the Amhara historic mission as a custodian of the Ethiopian nation, with an eschatological view of Ethiopia as a chosen nation, claiming the political salvation of the country will come through the imagined millenarian Tewodros III. Supporters also depict Ethiopia as the land where the glory of the Trinity is manifested: Ethiopia, the home of St Mary; Ethiopia, the light of the world; Ethiopia, the ruler of the world.¹¹⁵ The group has a strong presence on social media, with supporters portraying Amhara persecution and Orthodox decline as a deliberate act by the government and other religious communities, all under the service of an international conspiracy to weaken Ethiopia the covenantal nation.¹¹⁶ In short, they argue that ‘the essence of Tewahedo is under attack’, with those ‘bent on destruction ... relentlessly plotting against us’.¹¹⁷

Some religious–political activists, also referred to as ‘Ortho-Amhara’,¹¹⁸ have merged Amhara nationalism with Orthodox Christianity, viewing the church as central to Amhara identity. Key social media figures such as Habtamu Ayalew, an Orthodox deacon and diaspora media personality, use platforms such as Ethio-360 to promote a narrative of double victimization, claiming that both the Amhara and the Orthodox Church are under attack by Oromo elites and

114 *Moa Tawahedo*, Facebook post, 25 December 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/leTawahedo/videos/2097163050642702>. Also see: International Orthodox Tewahedo Alliance (IOTA) website, <https://iotaethio.org/our-news/>.

115 ‘ኢትዮጵያ የሌለም ብርሃን ማነው ምንድነው አላማውስ’ (‘Who are Ethiopia—*ye Alem Birhan* and what are their objectives?’), *Berzeli media*, 9 September 2022. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnA931zmMko>.

116 ኢትዮጵያ የዓለም ብርሃን - Ethiopia Ye Alem Birhan, ‘ኢትዮጵያ የዓለም ብርሃን - ኢትዮጵያዊነት (Ethiopiawinet) | ክፍል-2’, *YouTube*, 18 July 2022. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au52ISBcKRU>.

117 Author translation from Amharic to English. See: ‘እዝቡ መልክቶችን ያልተቀበለበት 7 ምክንያቶች! ኢትዮጵያ የዓለም ብርሃን | አባ አምታ ኢየሱስ | ተክለ ኪዳን’, (‘Seven reasons why the people did not accept the messages’), *Ethiopia—ye Alem Birhan*, 7 November 2022. Accessed 31 January 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-J5_PFFQEI.

118 Yonas Biru, ‘Ethiopia Risks Unravelling for Lack of PR When PR Matters the Most’, *Borkena*, 10 April 2021. Accessed 31 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2021/04/10/ethiopia-risks-unravelling-for-lack-of-pr-when-pr-matters-the-most/>.

what they call the ‘*Oromuma* project’ (Oromo domination of Ethiopia) linked to Abiy’s political rise.¹¹⁹ This view is situated in the broader context of state (re)formation, which has witnessed the progressive decline of the Amhara–Orthodox from their previously dominant position in national life.

In these and similar statements by various Orthodox activist groups, there is a deep nostalgia for the past (idealized) glory of the EOTC—a time when the church shaped national identity, controlled its symbols and enjoyed privileged access to state resources. From this perspective, any efforts by the government to balance power or address the rights of historically marginalized religious minorities (and other minority groups) are seen in terms of reverse domination, threatening not only the EOTC but also the very survival of the Ethiopian state. At stake is how to come to terms with the inevitable decoupling of the Ethiopian state from an Orthodox nation. Government failure to protect citizens has reinforced grievances, while at the same time Orthodox activists are blending imperial nostalgia with legitimate protection demands.

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

During the initial years of the political reforms that began in 2018, political liberalization facilitated Orthodox Christian political mobilization; notably, through the rise of Amhara nationalism and the formation of the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA). NAMA advocates for the protection of Amhara minorities (resident outside of the Amhara region) and seeks to restore the historical centrality of Amhara identity in Ethiopia. This movement has deep ties to Orthodox Christianity, reflecting both the religious demography of the Amhara people and the historical fusion of ethnic and religious identity in Ethiopia. Amhara identity is often framed in religious terms that link Amharas to Orthodox Christianity and the Christian identity of Ethiopia. The NAMA discourse reinforces this connection, although the group has sought broader inclusivity, incorporating some Muslim leaders. During the debates about Amhara nationalism that eventually led to the establishment of NAMA, even in the most secular versions of the movement, Orthodoxy remains inseparable from Amhara identity, as this Muslim Amhara participant observes:

When Amhara nationalism started in 2016, there was a debate about whether to rally around ‘Orthodox under attack’ or ‘Amhara under attack.’ Ultimately, the argument for ‘Amhara under attack’ prevailed, as it was more inclusive. But it quickly became clear that Amhara nationalism and Orthodoxy were inextricably linked. Even if NAMA’s leadership were entirely Muslim, it would still be impossible to separate Amhara identity from

119 This project is based on the claim—largely made by Amhara nationalists—that the post-2018 Ethiopian state has been dominated by the Oromo. Parallel to this, Orthodox activists see the Oromo schism as part of the broader political agenda of the *Oromuma* project. That is, Orthodox activists believe the breakaway church faction was backed by both the Oromia regional government and the federal government, with some even alleging Protestant complicity. Interview with member of the Kidusan Mahibere, Addis Ababa, 25 September 2024.

Orthodoxy due to historical reasons.¹²⁰

By the 2021 elections, Amhara nationalism had complicated the relationship between the Abiy administration and the EOTC. Amhara nationalists accused the government of pursuing a genocidal project against the Amhara and Orthodox Christians, with NAMA claiming that violence against the Amhara was coordinated by government structures.¹²¹ From their perspective, the persecution of the Amhara and Orthodox Christians is systemic, with Oromo political forces aiming to dismantle Orthodox (Amhara) Ethiopia. This view positions Abiy as a double other—both Oromo and Protestant—creating further tensions with those Orthodox Christians who see his policies as an attack on their religious and ethnic identity. In July 2022, the ethnically targeted killing of more than 300 Amhara in Gimbi in Oromia further agitated Amhara nationalism.¹²² For its part, the government held the Oromo Liberation Army responsible for the massacre.¹²³

The ethnonationalist Amhara militia, Fano, have further deepened the connection between Amhara nationalism and Orthodox Christianity, blending political activism with religious identity. This alliance overlooks the sizable Amhara Muslim minority, however, members of which feel increasingly alienated by the Orthodox content of Amhara nationalism.¹²⁴ The Fano have become a symbol of resistance for many Amhara people, drawing strength from Christian iconography; for example, wearing crosses associated with the EOTC. These crosses are seen as both religious symbols and as emblems of the Amhara struggle for a new Ethiopia, in which they play a central role.¹²⁵ The EOTC is viewed as a spiritual and political anchor in this vision, guiding movement claims of reviving the ancient Orthodox Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. A slogan used in some Fano circles, which describes Amhara as ‘*Arash, Qedash and Negash*’ (farmers, priestly and born to rule), indicates how deeply Amhara nationalism is embedded in Orthodox religious identity.

Further investigation is needed to understand the role of religious authority in the Fano movement. In regions where the Fano is most active—such as Gonder and Gojjam—prominent leaders such as Zemene Kasse and Eskindir Nega claim a divine mandate to lead, asserting that they were chosen by their respective monastic patrons and tapping into the millenarian beliefs

120 Robsan Gaadisaa (@SiifanR), Twitter(X) post, 26 March 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://x.com/SiifanR/status/1640098742526177285>.

121 ‘Ethiopian government implicated in Amhara Genocide’, *Borkena*, 19 April 2021. Accessed 3 February 2025, <https://borkena.com/2021/04/19/ethiopian-government-ethiopia-amhara-genocide/>.

122 ‘Ethiopia’s Abiy reports new civilian killings in Oromia’, *Al Jazeera*, 5 July 2022. Accessed 3 February 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/5/new-killings-in-ethiopia-romia>.

123 *Al Jazeera*, ‘Abiy reports’.

124 Interview with former member of NAMA, Addis Ababa, 29 October 2024.

125 Atrsaw Necho and Yared Debebe, ‘Understanding the Fano insurgency in Ethiopia’s Amhara region’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024. Accessed 19 March 2025, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Understanding-the-Fano-Insurgency_final.pdf.

of the Orthodox Church.¹²⁶ In short, these leaders present themselves as divinely appointed guardians of the Amhara people and their role in the future of Ethiopia. This religious claim to leadership introduces a significant layer of complexity to the Fano movement, blending ethnonationalism with a theological justification for power. The appeal of these leaders to divine authority both strengthens their political position and suggests a deep intertwining of religious and political power in the movement. Their self-ascribed divine mandate for political leadership echoes broader religious narratives and underscores the centrality of faith in their struggle for recognition and influence.

Interestingly, the divine claim to leadership by Fano leaders parallels the messianic self-understanding of Abiy. This further complicates the political landscape. Dynamics such as this create a situation of integration through conflict, whereby competing religious and political visions—each claiming divine legitimacy—intensify tensions but also force the articulation of a new contested national identity.¹²⁷ In this context, both Abiy and the Fano are engaged in a struggle for political and religious legitimacy, positioning their visions of the future of Ethiopia as divinely ordained, yet in direct competition with each other.¹²⁸

The government has accused Fano groups of using monasteries and sacred sites for political and military activities, leading to military actions such as the assault on Debre Elias monastery in East Gojjam on 25 May 2023. Founded in 1474, Debre Elias, a key centre for EOTC clergy training, was targeted by the ENDF with artillery fire and bombardment. The Fano who were staying there resisted the attack for five days. Among the 600 monastery residents, 570 were killed or injured.¹²⁹ The local peace and security office called the attack preventative, claiming it targeted armed individuals suspected of using the monastery as a base. The government specifically identified Eskinder Nega and his organization, the Amhara Popular Front (AFP), as the main perpetrators, claiming that 200 AFP members were killed during the operation.¹³⁰ The

126 Remote interview with residents of Gondar, Debre Markos and Majete, 13–15 October 2024.

127 Gunther Schlee, *Difference and Sameness as Modes of Integration: Anthropological Perspectives on Ethnicity and Religion*, New York and Oxford: Bergham Books, 2018.

128 Schlee's concept of 'integration through conflict' explores how groups that are in competition or conflict—whether for resources, political power and/or cultural dominance—are simultaneously drawn into a complex form of integration. Through their struggles and interactions with one another, these groups are integrated in the sense that they shape and strengthen their own distinctiveness, while also becoming interdependent. They are forced to interact in a way that gives them a greater awareness of one another's existence and roles, with this interaction contributing to a broader political, social and/or cultural framework. See: Schlee, *Difference and Sameness*.

129 'Ethiopia: Military Assault on a Bastion of Orthodoxy', European Centre for Law and Justice, 21 July 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://eclj.org/religious-freedom/un/ethiopia--570-victimes-dans-lattaque-dun-monastere-orthodoxe>.

130 Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 'EPO June 2023 Monthly: Political Violence Declines in Amhara Region Following Government Crackdown', ACLED, 12 July 2023. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/07/12/epo-june-2023-monthly-political-violence-declines-in-amhara-region-following-government-crackdown/>.

government later confirmed that Orthodox monasteries were being used for military training—in Gojjam and also near Addis Ababa, a point PM Abiy made during his consultation with the EOTC synod and regional representatives in April 2024.¹³¹ This conflict marked a significant escalation between the government and the Fano, ahead of the latter’s major offensive in summer 2023. While the EOTC acknowledged armed groups were operating nearby, it denied any militia presence in the Debre Elias monastery, stating that such activity was confined to its exterior.¹³² A local official also notes the connection between the Ethiopia–*ye Alem Birhan* group and the Fano insurgency in Gojjam.¹³³

Orthodox identity politics has also become intertwined with party politics, especially with the rise of the Enat Party in the lead-up to the 2021 elections. While not explicitly Orthodox, the party is widely seen as aligned with the EOTC due to its leadership, which is made up of devout Orthodox Christians, and the party emblem, which resembles EOTC symbols. The Enat platform centres on restoring the former glory of Ethiopia and opposing ethnic federalism, positioning itself against the Prosperity Party and its perceived Protestant ties.¹³⁴ Despite mobilizing widely in the 2021 elections, Enat failed to secure any seats. On 4 May 2024, after the government imprisoned two senior leaders of Mahibere Kidusan (Association in the Name of Saints) and the heads of the EOTC south and west Africa dioceses, Enat strongly condemned the actions, accusing the government of undermining the church through repression and collaboration with militant groups such as the OLA. The Enat Party views government attacks on the church as being driven by religious motives and its leadership argue that the government is using a dual strategy: allowing armed groups to attack, while it carries out targeted persecution in urban areas.¹³⁵ Orthodox Christian-leaning websites also report that the imprisonments were linked to the government assumption that the EOTC was involved in a planned but foiled Fano group attack in Addis Ababa, two days prior to the arrests.¹³⁶

131 *Fana Television*, ‘ጠ/ሚ. 00.፩ አለመድ’.

132 ‘EOTC TV | ወቅታዊ ጉዳይ | ብሔረ ብፁዓን አዳ መልክእ ሥላሴ አንድነት ገዳም (‘Current affairs—Bihere Bitsuan Atse Melkea Trinity Unity Monastery’), *EOTC TV*, 5 June 2023. Accessed 3 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv8JDpd3SE&t=1317s&ab_channel=EOTCTV.

133 Ethiopia—*ye Alem Birhan*, ‘ኢትዮጵያ የዓለም ብርሃን ስለ አሁኑ መሪዎቻችን እና ስለ አጣፊንታቸው’ (‘Ethiopia—the Light of the World on current leaders and their fate’), *Youtube*, 22 December 2019. Accessed 12 November 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-23ottePyEQ>.

134 Sisay Sahlu, ‘Enat party introduces a mix of ideologies’, *The Reporter*, 20 March 2021. Accessed 3 February 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/11057/>.

135 ‘Enat Party tends to see religious motives in government attack against Orthodox Church’, *Borkena*, 7 May 2024. Accessed 3 February 2025, <https://borkena.com/2024/05/07/enat-party-tends-to-see-religious-motives-in-government-attacks-against-orthodox-church/>.

136 ‘Arrested Mahibere Kidusan leaders reportedly released’, *Borkena*, 4 May 2024. Accessed 19 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2024/05/04/arrested-mahibere-kidusan-leaders-reportedly-released/>.

CONCLUSION

To understand both current church–state relations and interfaith relations, it is crucial to consider the historical dynamics of power and marginalization. The 1974 revolution reshaped the Ethiopian state, empowering previously marginalized groups and sparking grievances from those once dominant, especially the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. As EOTC influence has waned over time, religious minorities such as Muslims and Protestants have gained prominence, creating tensions. Long accustomed to dominance, the EOTC now views efforts toward equality in terms of reverse domination, fearing further loss of power. The government must navigate this shift, taking Orthodox sensibilities into account, while addressing historical inequalities and resource distribution, in particular in relation to public spaces.

A historical perspective also sheds light on current challenges the EOTC faces. The rise of former religious minorities, now politically empowered as religious majorities in some regions under ethnic federalism, has led to violence against the EOTC. This violence is not isolated but rooted in past religious and ethnic inequalities, which are shaping current patterns of conflict, often expressed in overlapping ethnic and religious terms. A historical approach is essential for understanding these tensions and informing effective policy solutions in the current situation.

In recent years, the church has been actively seeking to reclaim agency, engaging in public debates on religion and politics. On the one hand, EOTC demands for protection are legitimate and the government needs to address these with a greater sense of urgency. On the other, church concerns over the decline of its historically dominant position, fuelled by state reform and a siege mentality, along with an approach to political mobilization that is intertwined with ethnic nationalism, are not achieving the desired outcomes. Increasing EOTC focus on ethno-religious politics poses risks, particularly in exacerbating sectarian tensions and undermining the national unity it has historically championed. As the church navigates the evolving political landscape in Ethiopia, its future influence depends on balancing its religious identity with its engagement in the national project. The church must carefully consider the risks of deeper political entanglements, while maintaining its central role in Ethiopian society.

In general, the interplay between religion, politics and society in Ethiopia requires a delicate balancing act that simultaneously addresses historically shaped inequalities between religious communities and fosters national cohesion, without compromising the autonomy of religious institutions. Embracing internal diversity and fostering religious tolerance and co-existence with those groups that were previously seen as threatening can help address EOTC concerns. This approach can both meet church demands and promote religious coexistence to contribute to social cohesion and political stability.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

These policy considerations are tailored to various key stakeholders. They are designed to help create a more inclusive, cohesive and peaceful Ethiopia in which religious diversity is embraced as a strength rather than perceived as a source of division.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Uphold the secular order for national stability

In a deeply divided and religiously plural society such as Ethiopia, preserving the secular order is crucial for maintaining stability. A secular government, free from religious bias, is essential for promoting unity among the diverse religious and ethnic groups across the country. The government should strengthen secular principles, avoiding religious references in political messaging, and refrain from any actions that suggest preferential treatment of religious communities—whether in resource distribution or in labelling one as ‘transformational’ and another as ‘anti or non-developmental’. A constitutional secular state deliberately and outspokenly positions itself as impartial with regard to doctrinal questions of religion. Such measures will help prevent the rise of quasi-religious political parties and foster a more inclusive political environment.

Conflict-sensitive balancing acts

The government must address the historical religious inequalities that contributed to the hegemonic status of the EOTC, while also responding to legitimate demands for protection by the church. This includes ensuring fair access to state resources for all religious communities, expanding the scope of national identity and its symbols, and addressing the security crisis—while upholding the rule of law. Failing to strike this balance could fuel the rise of grievance-driven communities, each blaming the government or religious others for their diminished power or influence. Moreover, neglecting the ongoing security crisis risks framing it in ethnic and religious terms. The government needs ideological consistency in navigating these challenges, moving beyond the current oscillation between glorifying the imperial past and addressing the deep-rooted inequalities tied to that same history, affecting both religious and other minority groups.

Promote cooperative engagement between state and religious institutions

The secular principle of separation between state and religion does not prohibit cooperative engagement, especially in areas of common interest such as development and peacebuilding. Religious institutions can play a critical role in fostering social cohesion by providing moral authority that resonates with local communities. An autonomous and legitimate religious institution can serve as a valuable partner to the state, helping promote social harmony and national unity, both at the grassroots and national levels.

Mitigate religious and ethnic majoritarianism

A strong regional human rights framework should be established and enforced to protect religious minorities, fostering a more cohesive and integrated political and economic community. As outlined in the Ethiopian constitution, the federal government is responsible for safeguarding human rights through the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the Ethiopian Institution of the Ombudsman (sic; Ombuds or Ombudsperson). It is also hoped that the National Dialogue process can create an agenda to protect emerging regional ethnic and religious minorities.

FOR THE EOTC

Foster coexistence with other religious communities

The process of decoupling the Ethiopian state from the Orthodox nation is ongoing. Further adjustments are inevitable. The Ethiopian polity has made significant progress in liberalizing society and addressing historically rooted social inequalities over the last five decades. There is, however, a need to expand the inclusion and social justice agenda, as these should be understood as central to ensuring the survival of the Ethiopian state. Attempts to recreate hegemonic projects are not only untenable but also counterproductive. Legitimate EOTC demands for protection should not be conflated with a nostalgia for its past dominant status. Instead, the church should focus on fostering coexistence with other religious communities.

Prioritize timely reunification with the Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Despite declaring independence and forming a separate synod, the Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church (TOTC) continues to recognize Abune Mathias as the patriarch of the church. Reconciliation efforts must be prioritized, as there is no guarantee that this recognition will continue after his tenure. The full separation of the Tigray clerics from the national church would significantly undermine the viability of the EOTC.

Enhance inclusivity and diversity

The EOTC must prioritize inclusion by reflecting the multilingual and multi-ethnic identity of Ethiopia in both its liturgy and leadership. The positive steps taken during the reconciliation process and efforts to address imbalances are encouraging but more can be done. Incorporating diverse languages into services and expanding representation in leadership will address internal calls for inclusivity, while safeguarding church autonomy and relevance in a modern and pluralistic Ethiopia. This approach can also help the church navigate demographic challenges, as competition in the religious marketplace is inevitable in the context of religious pluralism and democratic governance.

Guard against political mobilization of religious identity

The politicization of religious identity in the church can exacerbate internal divisions and increase tensions between religious communities and the government. Some Orthodox activists who are also political figures have formed quasi-religious political parties, which risks further fragmenting the Ethiopian Orthodox community. As is the case for other religious communities, the EOTC should focus on its spiritual mission and resist political activism that could fuel

sectarian divisions and contribute to both interfaith and political (government) tensions.

FOR FORMER RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Adopt a historical sensibility in demanding rights

While ongoing demands for redress of past inequalities by religious minorities such as Muslims and Protestants are both understandable and justified, addressing these historically entrenched imbalances is a complex and gradual process. The deep-rooted nature of these disparities requires a carefully considered approach, involving not only political and legal reforms but also efforts to foster social cohesion and mutual understanding between religious communities. Achieving lasting change will require time, consistent dialogue and a commitment from all sides to overcome historical grievances and build a more inclusive society.

Cultivate a broader language of justice

Leaders of historical religious minorities should cultivate a broader language of justice that demonstrates empathy and solidarity with new religious and ethnic minorities in regions where they are now the majority. Comparative religious discourse should also avoid statements and labels that verge on hate speech, fostering instead a culture of respect and mutual understanding. These insights are equally relevant for majority faith groups.

FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS PLATFORMS

Enhance IRC legitimacy

Founded in 2010 by various religious institutions in Ethiopia, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRC) serves as the primary platform for interfaith dialogue and plays a key role in managing the relationship between the government and religious communities. While the IRC has facilitated commendable interfaith dialogues and mobilized believers on national issues, it faces a legitimacy deficit, with concerns about potential government capture. Its legitimacy is further undermined by its representational structure, which some view as insufficiently inclusive or reflective of the diversity of Ethiopian religious communities. The IRC should shift from representing only major religious denominations to becoming a more inclusive communal body.

Establish the IRC as a key platform for coexistence

The IRC should play a proactive role in promoting peaceful coexistence and addressing religious grievances when rights are violated. It must be positioned as a neutral arbiter that can mediate conflicts, ensuring that the rights of all religious communities are respected and upheld.

Contribute to nation-building and national cohesion

The IRC should not only focus on addressing interfaith conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence and collaboration among religious institutions and communities in Ethiopia but should also expand its efforts to include a broader agenda of nation-building and national cohesion. By fostering unity across all sectors of society, the IRC can play a crucial role in strengthening the social fabric of Ethiopia and contributing to long-term stability.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

EDHS	Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EOTC	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
Fano	(<i>Amharic</i>) militia
<i>hagar nat</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) national church
<i>Iftar</i>	(<i>Arabic</i>) fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan
IOTA	International Orthodox Tewahedo Alliance
IRC	Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia
<i>Menbere</i>	(<i>Ge'ez</i>) See of
<i>Moa Tewahedo</i>	(<i>Ge'ez</i>) The Winning Tewahedo
NAMA	National Movement of Amhara
<i>neftegna</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) gun bearer
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
<i>Oromuma</i>	(<i>Oromiffa</i>) Oromo domination of Ethiopia
TOTC	Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church
TDF	Tigray Defense Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
<i>ye Islam mengist</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) a government of Muslims
<i>ye Pente mengist</i>	(<i>Amharic</i>) a government of Protestants

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